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> There they taught her modesty, chastity, silence, obedience... She did as she was told, but it was all very confusing, because she could not understand why the things that happen outside of people were so different from what she felt inside of her.
>
> —From "Virgin Violeta" by Katherine Anne Porter

In studying human memory, psychologists encounter a phenomenon called the Reminiscence Bump: the period in which a substantial proportion of a person's memories in his or her life cluster between the ages of ten and thirty. We remember our young adulthood vividly, and the choices we make in those tender years often dramatically shape the way the rest of our lives unfold. In this first half of my novel, I examine the inner lives of two young people, Dex and Nore, how they encounter and challenge the pressures and traumas placed upon them by the society of a rural Texas town in the early 1980s. How does a young woman survive with a child born out of wedlock, in a world run by oil men and homecoming queens, preachers and football boosters? How does a young man shore up under the weight of seeing his athletic prowess, his self-worth as determined by the town, peak at eighteen? Why would someone choose not to raise their own child, and what prior decisions eventually culminate in that choice? In this first half of the novel, I explore the fraught relationship between mothers and daughters, young men and young women—anticipating a deeper excavation of these questions of parenthood, love, and forgiveness in part II.

A TOWN THAT MADE MONDAY, PART I

by

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CHAPTER 1

1982

It was October. Dex Langley, running back, skimmed his eyes over the gleaming black jerseys of the McClellan Bulldog's defensive linemen. It was fourth quarter, third and ten, Falcons straddling the Bulldogs' thirty yard line. The Falcons were up twenty-seven against the Bulldogs' fourteen. But Coach Maddox, never satisfied with an imperfect performance from his boys, stalked the edge of the field as though scenting for blood. The Falcons' center snapped the ball to quarterback Clark Kovar, and Dex lurched into space, into the pocket he knew would be there between the cornerback and defensive end. Kovar passed to Dex. He caught but fumbled. The Bulldogs nearly stripped the ball. He managed to roll over at the last second, lodging the ball between his stomach and the ground.

Sometime after Thursday morning practice, a skunk had crawled into an unreachable spot beneath the bleachers and expired. Its dying seasoned the air with the musk of sulfur and amplified all the other smells: sweat, churned grass, and the funk of mildewed shoulder pads. Later, whenever his hand ached before a thunderstorm, or stiffened in cold weather, that death smell would come back to him, a memory of a memory.

In the huddle, Dex spit out his mouth guard. He didn't feel the rope of saliva trickling down his neck, he was so drenched in sweat. Kovar reckoned he should run the ball. But Dex said, "I got it this time," and so they lined up to run the play again. Dex was a senior, and Kovar was a junior, so he trusted Dex's call.

Compared to boys who played for bigger, richer schools in the city, Dex wasn't all that impressive: he stood barely over six foot, narrow through the hips and shoulders, was always one-seventy no matter how many weights the trainers slid onto the barbell, or free hamburgers he got at Camille's Diner. He could run a four-point-four second shuttle on a good day, caught about seventy-five percent of the passes he was thrown, and had a decent eye for finding seams in the defensive plays. But in 1982, Fergus, Texas, was a place where a kid like Dex Langley could earn idol-like admiration for an okay football talent. His height and weight, his average receiving yards, and the amount of iron he could bench were facts everyone knew—his coaches, the coaches of any team Fergus had ever played, the officers of the Quarterback Club, the chief of police whose son was also on the team. The old men who sat in camp chairs behind the goal posts shouting obscenities and cracking peanuts into the damp grass knew these stats. It was printed up into glossy flyers the cheerleaders' mothers sold at the ticket window of Falcons Memorial Stadium.

Kovar lobbed the ball to Dex. He traced its blurred arc against the black sky. Sidestepped a tackle from a linebacker, caught the ball. He pivoted and sprinted along the sideline. His best friend, tight end Harris Johnson, loped two steps behind him. He dodged two tackles and heard Harris go down with a third. His heart squeezed itself up

somewhere beneath his collarbone and his legs went numb. He was going to make it. Later, he realized he should have remembered watching film the past Saturday morning, when the offense coach kept rewinding a game tape of the Bulldogs' defense players, pointing out the greyhound-like agility of their safety. Dex should have remembered that just because he could slip by the McClellan safety once did not mean he was home free.

He crossed the ten and what felt like a bag of sand slammed into his left hip. Without thinking, he cradled the ball with his left hand and thrust his right out to catch his fall. The safety who'd hit him tumbled over his back, throwing an elbow to break his own collision with the earth. The safety's elbow met Dex's hand, and then there was nothing but pain lancing through his middle knuckle all the way up to his wrist.

He lay still on the turf. Needles pricked his leg muscles all over from the fury of his run. He made a mental inventory of his body: besides his hand, it seemed he'd also bruised his hip pretty good. He had landed with his facemask pointing toward the home stands. Every person in them was on his or her feet, watching him. Then his teammates' black and green cleats made a forest around him, and the weight of the Bulldogs' safety lifted. He shakily rose to his feet. Applause came down from the stands with a sound like falling dominoes.

Dex showed the hand to Doc Kingston when he limped back to the bench. The retired physician, now team medic, took Dex's hand in his age-freckled ones. The doctor smacked his gum and kneaded the swollen middle knuckle. He ignored Dex's jerk of pain. Dex looked away from the doctor, along the line of benched players and orange drink coolers. The other players' helmets dangled from their hands as they watched Doc

examine Dex’s fingers. Harris Johnson caught Dex’s eye and jerked his head slightly, like he was saying *I really tried. Sorry, man.*

Behind the team, the cheerleaders held their pompoms up around their chins, as though their hands were clasped in prayer beneath them. Little kids in green jerseys poked their heads between the rails of the bleachers to get a closer look. The propane cans people made into noisemakers by inserting ball bearings into them went unrattled. Why hadn't Coach Maddox sent in the second-string running back already?

Dex's father, Harold Langley, appeared over Doc's shoulder, his thin, leather-brown face squeezed into worry lines.

"How bad is it, son?"

"Pop, it's all right," Dex said. Parents were supposed to stay off the field. He'd told his father this too many times to count.

"I think it's broke," Doc Kingston said. Dex looked back at his mangled hand. “But you'll need an x-ray to confirm."

"He ain't out for the season, is he Doc?"

Doc popped his gum and twisted his mouth into a doubtful expression.

"Might need surgery."

"How long would he be out for?"

The doctor shrugged. "Depends how bad the break is, how high of a pain tolerance your boy has."

His father took Dex's hand from the doctor. The older men squinted down at the purpling knuckle, as though Dex were a collection of parts they could swap out to keep running.

"We'll wrap it up tonight," Doc said, "real tight so he can't re-injure it. I'll call my buddy up in Tyler, get you an x-ray first thing tomorrow."

His father walked Dex and the doctor off the field, toward the field house training room behind the stands. His mother and brother, Reggie, joined them on the other side of the bleachers. His family pressed themselves against the wall of Doc Kingston's office while he bandaged Dex's hand.

Reggie, just two years younger than Dex, watched without speaking. He'd shoved his hands into the pocket of his green Junior Varsity sweatshirt, like he figured they were safest there. He said nothing until Doc Kingston had finished the job. Dex's splinted middle finger stuck out from the rest in its white mitten of gauze.

"Nice," he said, laughing. "It's like you're gonna be flipping everyone the bird all week."

"Shut up," Dex said.

The doctor had wrapped his hand so tight it cut off the flow of blood, and so the break barely throbbed. He'd certainly had injuries that hurt worse than this one—stress fractures in his shins when he was twelve, dislocated shoulder when he was fourteen, his bell rung a couple times in practice. But this. Regular season ended in three weeks, and then it was playoffs if they were lucky.

After Doc Kingston had gone back to the field, Harold turned to Dex's mother and Reggie and told them to wait in the truck. Dex still sat perched on the vinyl-covered exam cot, legs dangling so the toes of his cleats brushed the concrete floor. His father closed the door and rubbed his hands together like he was cold, what he always did when he was anxious about something.

"We're lucky, lucky," he murmured as he paced before the cot. "Three weeks ain't so bad, after all. You boys nearly always play into December, late November at the least. Still time."

"Pop, that scout show up at all?"

His father stopped walking and scrubbed at the graying red stubble on his chin. At last he said, "He did, right after half time. I don't know if he saw you go down. Reckon he did, but he might not have. Might could have taken off to catch the end of the Marshall game."

Dex stared at the green walls of Doc Kingston's office while his father resumed marking the length of the room, the scrape of his hands like the sound of sandpaper on wood. He knew he wasn't a spectacular prospect, but his grades weren't bad—better than not bad, if he was honest—and he was faster than he'd been last year. He'd gotten letters of interest from A&M, San Marcos, Louisiana Tech, Arkansas, and West Texas. The Division I letters were more formal, less personal than the Division II schools' were. But he still held out hope.

There was a knock on the office door. Harold opened it, and there in all her green sequins and white leather fringed boots stood his girlfriend, Alma DeKalb. Like the other

dancers she'd painted her lips a bitten candy-red, black penciled around her eyes in thick rings.

"Is he all right?" she asked, bending sideways to look around his father.

"Come on in, Alma," Harold said. He held the door wider for her.

"I can't! Got to get back to the stands or Miss Nancy will pitch a fit. I just wanted to see you were okay."

Alma danced for the Falconette High-Steppers. She wore a glittery western-style leotard and skirt complete with boots and cowgirl hat and leather gauntlets, and performed synchronized kick routines with about twenty other dancers during half-time. She and Dex had been dating since the end of freshman year, and so Dex had watched her dance a half-time show a couple of times before he got bumped up to Varsity.

Football players occasionally liked to tease the cheerleaders about how their little jumps and toe-touches and memorized chants didn't add up to being a real sport. They did this just to get a rise of cute, feigned anger out of the girls. But when Dex had watched Alma dance, he thought he understood, for the tiniest second, what it was to experience a true art. Girls lined up ruler-straight, parallel with the sideline, kicking those white boots to their noses. Each one wearing a red smile like it was the easiest thing in the world. That was the magic of it all, that smile. That was the art. Making something surely so painful and impossible seem effortless.

Dex held up his gauze-wrapped hand.

"Other than this, A-Okay."

Alma bobbed her hatted head. "Call me tomorrow?"

Dex said he would. Alma dashed off beneath the bleachers.

"Real sweet girl you got there, son," Harold said. "I know I say it all the time, but you better be treating her good."

"Yeah," Dex said. "I am."

But thoughts of his girlfriend scampered away from his mind like spooked cottontails. There was no guarantee that the Falcons would make it past the regular season. Coburn was looking good this year, and so was Quincey, and East Birnham. What if the scout *had* seen his injury?

His father stood in the doorway still, illuminated in the white glare of the stadium lights. Every line of age and worry in his face seemed etched deeper, like eye black had been packed into them. Dex suddenly imagined himself twenty years older and standing just like his father was now, class ring glinting on his finger, seeing where his hard work had gotten him. All those years in the Pop Warner league and spring conditioning and August afternoons puking onto the grass. All of it disappeared in the split second it took two bodies to collide.

CHAPTER 2

Every night after closing at the Catfish King, Nore Wilson would mop the floor twice. Oil fields ringed the outskirts of Fergus like a badly strung necklace. Workers blowing off steam left their boot prints mortared on the floors of the few honky-tonks and pool halls that the Baptists on the Lovell County commission would allow. When those smoke-dim places quickly filled, the geologists and tool pushers and drillers spilled over into the crazy mosaic of fast food chains that had sprung up on the shoulders of Route 87 in the last few years. The barite that the roughnecks mixed into the drilling mud dried into a fine beige powder that made her eyes itch and water. She had learned to first wet the linoleum down with a spray bottle before beginning to clean.

Nore, short for Elanor, was seventeen years old. At work she looked about fifteen. She wore her too-big blue and yellow polo shirt tucked into her jeans, which she ironed carefully every morning to maintain a crisp line down the front of her legs. She wrestled her thin, ash-colored hair into a high ponytail that always fell limp to the base of her neck

It was a Friday night in October. The few roughnecks that hadn't elbowed with the rest of the town into Falcons Memorial Stadium had come for a late dinner of chicken-fried steak, hush puppies, slaw, and—what else?—fried catfish. Having worked at the Catfish King for about a year now, Nore knew that the roughnecks often pulled twelve-plus-hour shifts. When they came in to eat they were tired, and they were sick of each other's company. Not too long after she started work at the restaurant, Nore had

overheard a four-top discussing something called a "Lovell County Ten." As she delivered their greasy baskets of fish, conversation stopped at the table. She caught one of them eyeing the loose, partially unbuttoned collar of her polo. She heard the same man mutter "eight" as she left the table. Earlier in the night, one of the men she'd brought a corndog and fries had said, "Nice pins." Like her legs were something you tried to knock over at a bowling alley. Warmth prickled her neck and ears, but their approval pleased her almost as much as it embarrassed her. Nore's father used to talk to her mother like that, look her up and down when she came out of the bedroom on Sunday mornings. *I like that dress on you, honey. You got nice stems.*

Nore emptied the bucket, squeezed the last of the gray water from the mop, and clocked out with the line cooks at ten p.m. She climbed onto her bike, a mustard-yellow Schwinn, and pedaled down the narrow shoulder of 87 until she reached Main, where she turned right at the slate-dark windows of the Chevy dealership. The lights from Falcons Memorial Stadium glowed moon-pale over the false fronts of downtown. Last year, the Quarterback Club had raised the money for an authentic bronze church bell they rang whenever the Falcons put points on the board. As Nore rode past the stadium, the bell tolled.

When she got home, Nore made sure to park her bike in the far corner of the carport where her mother couldn't run into it with the ten-year-old Cadillac. Her mother worked the morning shift at the Carnation plant. In addition to her mother's car, there were two more parked in the pitted gravel of their drive. The maroon Datsun belonged to Agnes Fletcher, her mother's friend. The other was a newish blue Ford hatchback she did

not recognize. Nore went into the house through the back door, through the utility room, and into the kitchen.

There was her mother and Agnes Fletcher sitting at the table with cups of coffee and open Bibles. And there was Mr. Palmer, the assistant pastor of Fergus First Baptist. Agnes lifted her head when Nore walked into the house. Her mother's friend worked as a geriatrics nurse up at St. Cosmas's, and still wore gray scrubs beneath a black cardigan. Nore sniffed a carton of milk from the fridge before pouring herself a glass. Her mother flicked a glance over her shoulder at Nore, then returned her attention to Mr. Palmer.

The pastor sat on her mother's left side, peering through coke-bottle glasses at the book opened between them. Her mother's hand twitched to turn the page, and her fingers skimmed near his wrist. Nore drained the glass of milk, and opened the fridge to pour another.

At last her mother and the pastor turned in their seats to look at her.

"There's a casserole if you're still hungry," her mother said, her voice high and bright, like she was trying to convince Mr. Palmer she was still thirty-five. "It's in the oven still."

"No, thanks," said Nore. She moved toward the living room door. She might catch the end of *Remington Steele* if she hurried.

"Sit down and eat with us, Nore," Mr. Palmer said pleasantly. "Nice to see a young person like you working hard, what with all your friends over at the football field tonight."

Like Mr. Palmer knew anything about Nore, or her friends, or where she worked. She edged closer toward the den.

"Nore," her mother said, the pitch of her voice ratcheting up a few more notches, "Mr. Palmer was real kind to remember that Agnes and I work too late to make it to Wednesday nights."

"Thanks, Mr. Palmer," Nore said. She was almost through the door now, but she realized that she did not want to watch TV anymore. The air in the house was different with the pastor in it, as if all the furniture and carpets had been replaced with new ones that looked exactly the same, but did not have their familiar smells.

Instead, she went back outside. Behind the carport sat a tin-sided shed with a padlocked door. Nore kept the key to this padlock on a thin chain around her neck. She took the lock off the door and squinted into the darkness. By the yellow glow of the security light in the backyard she could make out the shapes of the shed's contents. But Nore did not need the light. She knew the things in here by memory.

Here was the last of the auto garage her father had opened after he came back from Korea. Here was the corroded green toolbox with his wrenches, screwdrivers, ratchets, grips, and drill bits. Here was the air compressor and the set of jacks and the extension cords curled like dogs in sleep. She felt around for the cool, caged bulb of a shop light, and wrapped its cable around her arm. She plugged the light into the exterior outlet next to the back door, and the cream-colored hood of her mother's 1972 Sedan DeVille was thrown into sharp relief against the black night.

That morning, her mother had gone out to the Cadillac to find it dead. She'd had problems with the engine taking several minutes to turn over for some days before that. Her mother had had to pound on the neighbors' door at five a.m. to get the husband to come out and jump the battery for her.

Nore propped up the hood of the car, got the ratchet set from the tool kit, and rested the shop bulb on the intake manifold. She gripped a little six-inch Maglite between her teeth so she could pick out the tiny nuts and bolts on the battery. Her mouth filled with the flashlight's metallic tang.

Always disconnect the battery before you touch anything on the alternator, don't want to end up with your fingers chicken-fried, her father had once told her. She did so, careful to place each battery terminal where it couldn't make contact with the car's steel frame.

Ease the tension off the fan belt before you lift it from the alternator pulley. Nore shimmied under the fender, socket driver in one hand, Maglite in the other. The gravel dug into the soft flesh of her back. She placed the driver onto the bolt of the tensioner, tugged it counter-clockwise, and listened for the satisfying *snick* of the fan belt's release.

Slip the belt off the alternator pulley. Don't pull it all the way out, or you'll have to re-rig all the pulleys later. She lifted the fan belt off tenderly.

Disconnect all the electrical connections to the alternator. Make sure your ratchet ain't throwing sparks when you touch it to the mounting bolt, 'cause that means the battery's still engaged. Nore lifted the battery eye off the stud of the voltage regulator.

She grasped the round body of alternator in both hands and freed it, leaving a dark cavity next to the engine.

The alternator is like the heart. Engine's the stomach. Engine eats up fuel but the alternator's what keeps everything charged, gives the car juice when you go to turn it on. Your alternator goes out, nothing works.

Nore was ten years old. In two days, her father's service manager, Billy, would find him on the grubby carpet of his closet-sized office. *Undiagnosed Cerebral vasculitis,* the medical examiner would tell her and her mother. *Bled out in his brain*. But two days before that, a Saturday in June, her father had taken her to the garage, like he did on most Saturdays, to watch his grease monkeys crank up a mint-green 1965 Chevy Impala on the lifts to change out the clutch.

"Always wanted one of these beauties," her father said. Her small hand held inside his larger one, she could feel his palm go slick and warm, and her own fingers began to tingle, like he'd passed a kind of magic between the two of them.

Nore slipped into the utility room. She could hear her mother, Agnes, and Mr. Palmer murmuring in the kitchen. Opposite the washer (they had no dryer) was a narrow table and workbench. Nore spread some newspaper out and laid the alternator on it. She disassembled the voltage regulator and unscrewed the retaining bolts. Yes, it was as she suspected—the brushes on the regulator were so worn and brittle she feared they'd fall apart in her hands. As she worked, she zipped the key back and forth on its chain, a nervous tic she had. She kept that key close to her, a kind of talisman. Her mother was always talking about getting rid of those tools. *All kinds of snakes and spiders breeding in*

that shed, she'd say. Years from now, Nore would wonder if her mother had envied the bond her husband and daughter shared, if she later came to view those tools as a reminder that her daughter would never feel for Gertie what she felt for her father. Her mother came from the old guard of Junior League and society teas, garden club and the Tyler Rose Parade, and always seemed to be measuring Nore against that standard. *You're raising you a son, Frank*, she used to say whenever Nore and her father came into the house for lunch, their hands grimed in black.

She could do no more. Her mother would have to call her friend Tania, who worked at the plant with her, to give her a ride the next morning. Nore rose from the workbench, stretching out the pinched muscles of her neck. She went through the kitchen, not looking at the pastor or her mother, and locked the bathroom door so she could shower. After, she stood before the fogged mirror, staring at the blurry peach shape of herself. She turned sideways and tugged at the little knob of fat around her belly. She was slender everywhere except for that soft tummy. She swiped a hand across the wet silver, and wrapped herself in her mother's pilled blue robe. When she came out of the bathroom, her mother and Mr. Palmer were saying goodnight at the front door, Agnes having already departed.

Her mother's fluffy helmet of blonde hair trembled in the October breeze. The pastor's glasses flashed beneath the yellow porch bulb, and her mother bent her head as though to receive the man's blessing. Nore went into her room and closed the door. She found a musty towel and shoved it into the crack between the door and the carpet so she couldn't hear what they said.

Nore's father used to drive her and her mother to the Methodist church downtown. It was the oldest building in Fergus, with its stained glass the Masons had installed, and the wheezy pump organ badly played by eighty-year-old Mrs. Hodgkin. It had been their solemn ritual to follow church with lunch at Camille's on the square, she and her father sharing a piece of peanut butter pie while her mother lit up a menthol and frowned as their forks dug into the sweating mounds of whipped cream.

Nore crawled into bed and tried to sleep. The pipes in the bathroom groaned through the walls. She waited until the springs on her mother's bed sighed before she slipped across the hall. Her mother scooted to the far edge of the bed and held up the covers for her. Nore curved into her mother's body. Her mother seemed thinner than the last time they'd been this close. The wings of her shoulder blades stuck out from her nightgown like scallop shells.

"You get any nice tips at work?" her mother asked.

There had been a six-top of high school boys who came in before the game. Fergus was a small enough place that she knew the face, if not the name, of almost everyone at the high school. She did not recognize these boys. They must have been fans of the opposing team. They'd wanted her to smile before she let them take her order. She said, What kind of smile do you want? The loudest one said, The kind of smile you give your boyfriend. She said, I don't have a boyfriend.

"I got a twenty," Nore said to her mother.

"That's nice, hon. That's real nice."

Her mother picked up a copy of *Glamour* from the bedside table and began to thumb through the slick pages. Her Bible, with its worn edges and peeling gilt lettering, rested at her elbow, a pink hair ribbon marking the passage she'd been reading with Mr. Palmer. Nore recognized the ribbon as one she'd worn one Easter years ago, when she must have been five or six.

"Mom," Nore said, "why did we stop going to church after... After a while?"

Her mother paused, and the magazine fell open on a gradient of summer-hued lipsticks.

"Oh, hon. I guess we just got busy." She rubbed at the loosening skin beneath her chin. Her mother continued, "You know, they got all kinds of stuff for kids your age up at First Baptist. Mr. Palmer was telling me. They got foosball tables and a big color TV and on Wednesdays they take candy over to the Senior Citizens'."

"I work on Wednesday nights, Mom."

"Well, I think it's nice, anyhow. What they do over there for other folks." Her mother resumed flipping the magazine's pages. Nore settled against her mother's old rose-pink shams, which she'd had since Nore's father was alive, but the bed no longer felt comfortable. The mattress dipped in the middle, and it caused whoever was in it to roll closer to one another, so that Nore's hip wedged hotly next to her mother's.

"Night," Nore said, wiggling out from under the covers. She went back to her room and shut the door. She got into her own bed and pulled the quilt up to her chin. She looked out the room's one window, which was narrow and rectangular and closer to the

ceiling than the floor, so that Nore only ever saw the lower branches of the tree and bits of the sky, like fractured china.

CHAPTER 3

The Saturday after his injury, Dex's parents drove him an hour into Tyler to see the orthopedic specialist that Doc Kingston arranged for them to meet. The doctor, a round, white-haired, pink-cheeked man, shook Dex's left hand when he came into the examination room and introduced himself as Dr. Truman.

"Old Doc Kingston says you're a real special player down in Fergus," he said. His voice was the deep, fruity foghorn of a shopping-mall Santa Claus. Dr. Truman offered Dex's mother, who'd stood when he entered the room, the single chair, then shook hands with Dex's father as well. After shooting the breeze with his parents for a few minutes—he'd been delighted to discover the elder Mr. Langley was a forester, and wanted to know how best to get rid of some kudzu that was killing the rosebushes in his backyard—he unwound the wrappings on Dex's hand. Overnight, the middle knuckle had sunken, the flesh around it purpled and swollen. Dr. Truman x-rayed the hand, put the results up on his light board, and pointed out the tiny white cracks visible on the negative of Dex's hand, the fractures like lightning jumping between clouds.

"What you got here is a pretty bad articular fracture," the specialist said. "Knuckle cracked like a pecan shell."

Dex's father stepped forward to touch the x-ray.

"Will he be able to play again?" his mother asked.

Dr. Truman cradled Dex's hand lightly. The doctor's palms were soft, the nails cut even and buffed. They were like a girl's hands.

"What we're gonna do," the doctor said, "is knock the feeling out up to his shoulder. He'll be awake the whole time." His index finger circled Dex's bruised, collapsed knuckle with a moth-light touch. Dex chewed the insides of his cheeks to keep from scowling.

"Then we'll go in and insert some k-wires right through the skin, cinch all the bone up tight and put a cast on. In three weeks, we'll take some pliers and pull the wires out, nice and easy. Might have a bump to show for it, but with a little physical therapy—some exercises to get those muscles and ligaments lined up and strong again—he should be good as new."

The knotted lines on his father's face smoothed. He squeezed his wife's hand and smiled at her.

"Thanks, doc. You sure put our minds at ease."

Dr. Truman wrote Dex a prescription for painkillers. He advised Dex not to drive while taking them, said they might make his reflexes "fuzzy."

Harris drove over to see Dex that afternoon. Dex's best friend outweighed him by thirty pounds, all five-feet-ten-inches of him solid as a tree trunk, with curly brown hair he was growing long in the back. The first thing he did when he walked into the family room and saw Dex propped up with pillows watching the LSU game was to apologize.

“I should have yelled or something,” he said, staring at the screen and not Dex. “I shouldn’t of had that big burger before the game. Maybe I would’ve been a little quicker, taken that son of a bitch down before he got to you.”

Dex glanced toward the door to the kitchen. His parents weren’t the religious type, but his mother would tell his father if she caught him swearing.

“Don’t sweat it, man,” Dex said, voice flat. He was surprised to find he was angry at Harris, just a little. It wasn’t anyone’s fault but Dex’s that this had happened. But still, it had happened.

Harris sat at the edge of the couch with his elbows on his knees, shifting his weight from knee to knee restlessly, making Dex even angrier.

“Tell you what,” Dex said, “my pop just got a slick new .25 Savage I been wanting to take out for a spin. Want to try it out for me?”

“Sure thing, bud,” Harris said, the tension almost visible as it eased out of his shoulders.

The phone rang as they were about to leave the house. Dex’s mother appeared in the doorway of the family room, the farthest the phone’s cord would reach, with the receiver pressed to her shoulder.

“It’s Alma. Should I tell her you’ll call back?”

Dex glanced to Harris, then back to his mother.

“Tell her I’m taking it easy for the rest of the day.”

His mother frowned at him but walked back into the kitchen.

* * *

On Monday morning, Reggie, who'd only had his license a few months, drove Dex to school in the Jeep they shared. The idea of Reggie's driving the Jeep made him uneasy. For the past week, the Jeep's timing had been off, it backfired when he turned the key in the ignition, shook and spluttered when it idled, and often he got a whiff of gasoline, especially when the windows were down. He'd meant to tell his father about it, try and fix it himself. But with Reggie's JV practice in the mornings, his in the afternoon, games on Friday, and game tape at the field house on Saturday mornings, he hadn't had the time.

Added to that, it was a terrible morning to be driving—first there was fog, and then a heavy, steady rain rolled in over the pines. Dex gripped the seat with his undamaged hand and pressed his feet into the floorboards the whole way, worried at every curve in the rutted county road that his brother would skid into a ditch. But, somehow, Reggie made the fifteen-mile drive without serious mishap.

"Engine don't sound right," he said, before tossing the keys to Dex and trudging inside, shoulders hunched. Dex slammed the door harder than he'd meant to.

All weekend, Dex had worried about how he was going to manage his classwork when he couldn't use his right hand. But he should have known better. The head coach, the boosters on the Quarterback Club, Falcons parents with some leverage in the town—all leaned on teachers to keep players' academic stress levels low, even for a generally hardworking student like Dex who earned his grades. On Monday morning, Dex's Calculus teacher had one of her AP students making copies of his notes for Dex when he

walked into second period. In Physics, Mr. Gilroy said Dex could get credit if he just brought in a copy of his x-ray the next day for the class to see. Coach Jenkins, who taught U.S. History, showed a film about the Battle of Bull Run, and recruited one of the girls who usually sat in the back of the classroom talking with her friends to take notes for Dex as punishment. By lunchtime, his worries about his grades had eased, but anxiety about the college recruiters and his upcoming surgery still pushed at the back of his brain, a faint buzzing that, mixed with the sense-dulling painkillers, felt like a hand constantly pressed to the crown of his skull.

The minute he walked into the lunchroom Alma appeared by his side. Other than their brief meeting at Doc Kingston's office, he hadn't seen her since Friday afternoon when they'd gone to the Sonic for a pre-game date of burgers and milkshakes. He'd meant to call her back on Saturday night after Harris left, but just couldn't work up to it. Since her family was a church-going one, they made a point not to answer calls until Sunday afternoon. And by then, well. It was practically Monday.

"Why didn't you call me?" she greeted him. She grasped her hips and glared at him. Then, before he could speak, her anger dissolved and she pulled his arms around her, tucking her head beneath his chin. Over the top of her glossy brown ponytail, Dex saw a table of Junior Varsity Falcons give him appreciative smirks.

"I have to have surgery," Dex said when they broke apart. He held up the bandaged hand. He quickly explained the visit to Tyler, Dr. Truman's prognosis. Alma nodded along, like she was taking notes.

"What about that scout that was looking at you?" she asked as they took their usual spots one table away from the Junior Varsity players. "Any word from him?"

"Dunno," Dex said. He wanted to change the subject already. The very thought of college applications made his neck prickle so bad he wanted to rip off his shirt and scratch. "Guess we'll see."

Alma gazed at his bandaged hand, which she held in her lap, like she was trying to see through the gauze to his palm, where she could read their future. She rose to her feet.

"Let me get you some lunch," she said. She crossed the room and slipped into the lunch line.

He'd initially asked Alma out at the end-of-year class trip to the bowling alley when they were freshmen. Back then, it had been mostly a physical attraction, him knowing he could approach her because they moved in the same circles of friends. He'd liked her blue eyes, her long dark hair with teased bangs, and the killer year-round tan. She liked to joke that one of her grandmothers had been Mexican. In addition to dancing with the Falconettes, she played on the Lady Falcons basketball team, ran hurdles in the spring, was on the student council. Her father liked him, he'd known her since kindergarten, and she laughed at all his lame jokes with genuine, enthusiastic appreciation. At Homecoming a few weeks ago, she'd been voted onto the Homecoming Court, but had been relieved when the crown passed her over for the spirit squad captain. "Can you imagine?" she'd said to him afterwards, a vision in a sparkly blue dress. "Having to admit to kids at college that I was the *Homecoming Queen*?" He liked that she

didn’t care about popularity, but the fact that a lot of people liked her made it all the better.

And though her parents were pretty involved at the Baptist church, Alma had also surprised Dex by being the first one to kiss him, the first one to slide her hands beneath his shirt, straddle his lap when they made out in his jeep. But their physical contact stopped there. She told him she wasn’t necessarily waiting until marriage, but that if she and Dex did make love, she wanted to initiate it, and she wanted to be at least seventeen. By the spring of their junior year, she’d turned seventeen, and it still hadn’t happened. Dex was pushing things between them physically as far as she would allow. They were close. So close.

Alma came back to the table with a tray of hamburger pizza, chocolate milk, an apple, and an oatmeal cookie.

“Nothing you need to use a fork and knife for,” she said, placing it before him. She sat and nudged her thigh against his, took up her turkey sandwich and started eating. Her friend Beth-Ann joined them and the two girls started discussing a project in their English class. When Beth-Ann got up to throw her lunch away, Alma turned back to Dex. She slid her hand on his leg and squeezed.

"We're watching a movie over at Beth-Ann's tonight, if you want to come," she said.

How did she figure he was going to get there? Alma didn't have a car—her father drove her everywhere. Plus, when they'd first started dating, his father had sat him down

and given him a rambling talking-to about how a man never asked a woman to drive to be with him. Dex held up his bandaged hand.

She bit her lower lip. "What if Reggie drives you?"

"You want my kid brother looking over our shoulder all night?"

"I just thought it might be nice." She stroked a finger across his knee. "Before you have your surgery."

Dex lasered every ounce of attention he could muster onto the dull ache in his right hand. It wasn't as if his getting injured changed the way she was the kindest, nicest girl in the whole school, or made him forget the way her legs looked in those washed-out, almost white jeans. Maybe he just didn't want his girlfriend to go around unwrapping sandwiches for him while his hand healed. Or keep stroking his leg like that when he knew it wasn’t going to lead anywhere soon.

But she blinked up him with those long-lashed blue eyes, like he was the most important guy in the world to her.

"Okay," he said, mustering a smile. "I'll try and make it."

CHAPTER 4

Nore cupped her hands around the lighter flame her friend Patricia Lamar held out for her. Their other friend, Dollie Buford, passed around a package of peanut butter crackers. The three leaned against the cinderblock walls of the Ag barn. Rain curtained off the tin roof just inches beyond the toes of their sneakers. From the edge of the building, they could see the whole of the student parking lot, an expanse of gravel-strewn grass that had once been an auxiliary baseball field. About three-quarters of the student body drove pickups, the wheels of which now sank inch deep in puddles.

She puffed on her Pall Mall and closed her eyes, feeling the nicotine lap her nerves. Most kids and teachers who smoked did so on the patio outside the cafeteria, but Nore and her friends preferred this spot. They snuck out here to smoke during their lunch breaks and sometimes during class. Today, it was the latter. Sixth period study hall, which hardly counted as a class, anyway. Here, they could listen to the shriek of the circular saw as kids in shop class made birdhouses and wooden crosses and football-shaped signs for Homecoming. An engine sputtered and turned over in the auto-mechanics garage. Here was the real world. Here, kids learned to work with their hands and do useful things that helped other people

Dollie crumpled the empty wrapper and dropped her cigarette butt on the grass. She resumed the subject they'd been discussing on the way to their spot: namely, whether

Lonnie Rawlins was going to keep stringing Patricia along. Lonnie was a friend of Patricia's brother, two years older than them, and roughnecked in the oil fields.

"I mean, did he *say* was going to be at his dad's place all weekend, or did you just guess?" Dollie asked. She had three older sisters, all who were married with children, and Nore supposed she had come to think of herself as a kind of expert at romance.

Patricia scuffed at the dying embers of Dollie's cigarette with the tip of her high-tops.

"He said he was dove hunting. I know his dad's got a cabin, so."

"You guys haven't... you know?" Dollie asked.

Patricia shrugged, but her pale cheeks took on the color of the fire lane painted on the school's curb.

"When?" Dollie prompted when Patricia wouldn't speak.

"Last night."

"Oh," Dollie said, and she looked at her feet. "I'm sorry."

The air seemed heavier all of a sudden, and Nore wanted to take Patricia's hand and squeeze it, and tell her that it didn't matter. But it did matter. After Boone Payton, Nore thought she knew this better than her two friends did.

“You just forget him, Patricia,” Nore said. “You’re better off that way.”

Nore’s first year at Fergus High, she got it into her mind that joining the Freshman spirit squad would help reverse the reputation she’d had since elementary school for being aggressive and unfeminine—always the girls to play kickball at recess,

always the one to come home so dirty she had a permanent brown collar around her neck until the age of eleven.

At the time, it seemed important for boys to like her, for her to do anything that might make that easier. Her mother had been over the moon. She went to the drugstore and came back with a whole sackful of eyeshadow, mascara, eyelash curlers, shaving razors. By some miracle, Nore actually made the team.

Since freshmen spirit squad members cheered on Thursday nights, they were free to roam the bleachers during Varsity games so long as they "remembered to uphold their standards as role models for the school," as the cheer sponsor liked to phrase it. Nore and her fellow squad member, Liz Massey, were walking around the stands giggling, arms laced, when they came across Boone and a posse of his friends sitting at the far left of the student section. His friends were all older guys and girls, kids who could drive and buy tallboys at the corner store. When she approached Boone to say hello, she noticed the vaguely superior sideways glance the older girls slid her, like they were saying, *honey, you're out of your league*.

She said hi anyway. Boone was immediately the picture of chivalry. He scooted over to give her the spot he'd warmed up, so she wouldn't have to rest her bare legs against the cold aluminum. Put his jacket around her shoulders, asked her how her classes were going. When the game ended, he smiled sweetly at her, promised to give her a call soon. The second Nore and Liz were alone again, they nearly burst with excitement. Dissected every gesture, every glance, every flirtatious exchange.

"Nore," Liz said solemnly, "you might have a boyfriend soon."

Boone did not call. But Nore would not allow herself to be much discouraged. There were a hundred reasons for him to have forgotten, or been held up, or in some way deterred. She made a point to put herself in his way again the next week: in the lunchroom, at his locker, outside the gym. Every time he was attentive, he gently teased her, seemed to enjoy her company.

The next home game, Nore came upon Boone and his friends under the stands. This time, Liz Massey wasn't with her—she'd had to stay home and babysit her younger siblings—and Nore felt both lost and emboldened without her.

She struck up a conversation with Boone near the field house parking lot. His friends gave them some privacy by moving off to smoke and take nips out of a flask beneath some trees. Boone leaned against the corrugated tin of the field house, a relaxed smile on his face as he listened to her, eyes picking up flecks of white from the stadium lights. At one point, he asked her to repeat her question, leaning forward and putting his face near hers to better hear. She smelled whiskey on his breath.

He slid his hand down her shoulder to where the sleeve of her spirit squad t-shirt met her bare arm, the tender skin of her inner elbow.

"You ever been to a golf course? Want to go to one tonight?"

Looking back, Nore wished she'd heeded the tiny prickle of misgiving that rippled across the back of her neck. But it had been hard to think then, Boone's thumb tracing circles on her skin, the air so sweet with the fragrance of cut grass and burning leaves, of popcorn and cigarettes.

She went with them.

The other kids piled into a station wagon, but Boone took Nore with him in his truck. They drove out to the road that hemmed the farthest edge of the country club. The smooth greens of the golf course spread before them like an ocean. It was a moonless night, but even under the faint starlight the white sand traps glowed.

Boone went to the pickup's bed and came back with a golf bag.

"You drive around with your clubs?" one of the guys teased him. "You snob."

"Hey," Boone said with a chuckle, "I like to be prepared."

They tramped out to the nearest green, a knoll that swelled up over a long pit of sand that looked so soft Nore wanted to take off her shoes and dig her feet into it. Boone produced clubs, some tees, and a few golf balls from his bag and poked the tees in a line along the green.

They ran out of balls, and instead of retrieving them from the trap, just started lining up empty tallboys. The clubs' pings against the cans were so loud that Nore began to worry that someone might hear them. She turned to Boone and asked if it might be a good time to go.

"You want to get out of here?" he asked, that knowing grin that she liked so much dimpling his cheek. "You got it."

The two boys and three girls got back into the station wagon, Nore and Boone into his pickup. She thought he was taking her back to the stadium—and indeed, the closer they got to it, the more the little fist of nerves that had formed in her belly began to loosen—but then he turned onto a gravel county road, the others presumably continuing to their agreed-upon destination.

The tree trunks eventually backed off from the road, giving up a wide dirt shoulder, and Boone pulled onto it, cut the engine. He sat staring through the windshield for a few minutes before looking at her.

"I got a soft quilt in the back, if you wanna look at the stars," he said.

Nore had folded her legs up in the seat with her, and played with the laces of her Keds. Tying and retying them. Then she said she'd like to look at the stars if he wanted to.

Later, she would tally it all up—the quilt, the isolated road, the package of rubbers in his glove box (a gift from an older brother, perhaps. They sold rubbers to married men who got them from behind the counter along with their brown paper-wrapped dirty magazines)—and wonder how much he'd planned their evening in advance, or if he'd done this so many times that by then it was just routine. In the end, she would never know. He drove her home, said he'd see her at school. She waited all Saturday and Sunday for the phone to ring, but it never did.

She didn't see Liz Massey until second period, when they shared freshman English class. Since it was the end of the second six weeks, Mrs. Hornby was using class to hold conferences with each student at her desk to discuss their progress report. Meanwhile, the rest of the kids had the run of the classroom. Liz and Nore tucked themselves into the corner with the bookshelves so they could talk. Nore recounted everything up to the left turn down the county road. Then her breath hitched in her chest and she grasped Liz's arm.

"Liz," she whispered, "we did it."

Liz squinted her pale blue eyes in confusion.

"Wait, so y'all are going steady now?"

Nore couldn't say yes or no.

A few days after her conversation with Liz, the girls on the freshmen spirit squad started to give her funny looks, stopped speaking to her after practice. A few days after that, Nore arrived at school and stared at the door of her locker, unable to open it. All members of the spirit squad had green and gold paper megaphones taped to their locker with their name on it. Someone had added a W and changed the N to an H in her name.

Nore contemplated those ugly slashes of permanent marker, ears ringing the blood pumped in them so fiercely.

There was a little gasp behind her. Liz stared at the locker sign.

"I swear, I swear, I swear," she blubbered, "Irene said she wouldn't tell anyone. She's had the hots for him for ages, and I just thought I'd give her the heads up that—"

"That what?" Nore said bitterly, "that he might pop her cherry too?"

Liz had backed away, as if afraid Nore's rage might stain the tips of her white shoes. The look on her face was at once smug and horrified, and Nore knew that instant that she couldn't count on a single girl on the spirit squad to be her friend after this. She was damaged goods. And like the grannies in town might say, one bad apple could spoil the whole bunch.

The school counselor called Nore into the office a day later, saying she'd heard some "disturbing" rumors about her. Then the spirit squad sponsor came in and said that she was sorry, but the contract Nore had signed when she joined the spirit squad had

guidelines about what cheerleaders were not allowed to do on or off school property (they were role models for the rest of the school, after all), and so Nore would have to turn in her uniform.

Nore had sat in the counselor's office and felt the world contract around her, the glossy white walls lose their corners and become a bubble in a collapsing matrix. Then she was on her feet looking down at the counselor and cheer sponsor, her hands shaking with anger.

"I never wanted to be on your fucking spirit squad in the first place, anyway," she said quietly.

The squad sponsor, a tiny woman with short blonde hair and a narrow face, pinched her mouth in like she'd bitten into a lemon wedge. The counselor gripped the edge of her desk.

"What did you say?" the counselor asked, in that sharp almost-whisper that meant she hadn't misheard, but wanted Nore to acknowledge the awfulness of what she'd just said.

"You heard me," Nore said.

Then, because she was going to cry, and she was not going to give these two women the satisfaction of seeing her cowed, her humiliation, she ran from the office.

She ran right out of the school and to the bike rack, where she'd hopped on her bike and gone home. The school called her mother at the factory. Her mother had come home crying with anger.

"You can't embarrass me like that," she'd said. "You didn't even think how this would make me look. I'm not a bad mother. I'm not."

She and Nore stood on opposite ends of the living room shouting at each other, which concluded with her mother crumbling on the couch, sobbing, "You are all I have in the whole world."

She'd been suspended from school for three days, and spent a week after that in in-school suspension staring at a gray isolation divider. She didn't bother to turn in her uniform. The spirit squad sponsor, in a rare wise moment for a woman with such a girlish voice and hair as glassy-smooth as a roller rink, did not come after her for it. Nore never spoke to Liz Massey or any of the girls on the squad again. Boone had hurt her, sure, but living with her mother's successive hopes and heartbreaks from the men she courted after Nore's father died had taught her to expect that kind of pain, to know how to package it as a lesson learned and tuck it away. Girls, though. Sometimes she wished she could stop being one, become a man where everything was food and sex, easy peasy.

She chose her friends carefully after her break with the spirit squad. She chose Patricia because she'd moved to Fergus the next year and didn't know or care about Nore's past, and had the confidence and cynicism of someone who'd lived other places, who knew that life at Fergus High was not the end-all-be-all. Dollie—sweet, homely, chubby Dollie—had been Nore's friend since before kindergarten, and she was too lonely and shy a girl to deny friendship when so few came her way.

The rain dimpled a spreading milk-colored lake in the middle of the parking lot. The bell warbled from the direction of the school. 2:30 p.m. A smattering of kids, mostly boys in green letterman jackets pulled up over their heads against the rain, dashed out to their trucks. Engines divested of their mufflers growled to life—football players heading across town to the stadium. What did they do, days it rained like this? Lift weights? Curl up at the coach's feet and listened to tales from his glory days?

One of the last to emerge from the school was Dex Langley. He shuffled through the pebbly mud of the lot, his right arm and bandaged hand curled under the flap of a camouflage-dappled hunting jacket.

"Everyone was talking about him today," Dollie said. "One of the little freshmen in my bio class was working up a good cry, worried the boys weren't gonna get to state."

Nore puffed quietly on her Pall Mall. Dex had dropped the keys to his battered blue jeep and his left hand was now wrist-deep in a puddle, searching for them.

Dollie said, "Bless his heart. Can he even drive like that?"

Nore flicked her cigarette out into the gray air. Coach Jenkins, like so many of the coaches assigned to teach high school classes, seemed to have endless amounts of patience for players' antics in his classes, and little-to-none for girls. She and Patricia hadn't been *that* loud, and this was the third time in two weeks that Coach Jenkins had wheeled in a projector instead of teaching. Why was *she* the one to get called out, made to come to the front of the room, take notes because poor Dex Langley couldn't use his hand, when just two rows over Greg Sanger and Adam Niles were guffawing over the bad acting in the Bull Run film?

She watched Dex fish his keys out of the puddle and stared at them, like he'd suddenly forgotten which one opened the Jeep. His rust-colored hair was now so wet it dripped into the collar of his hunting jacket, as though it had been painted on his head. Then he opened the door, got into the cab, and sat there without turning on the car.

Nore picked up her book bag and flicked her cigarette into a nearby puddle. She pulled her cheap plastic poncho from the bag's outer pocket and slipped over her head.

"See y'all tomorrow," she said to her friends. Patricia gave her a gloomy little wave, and Dollie settled an arm around her shoulders, as if Lonnie Rawlins were going to walk around the corner at any moment and tell Patricia outright how he didn't much care for her.

Nore set off across the parking lot, to where her bike was chained to one of the school's gutter drains. She tried to avoid looking at Dex, but as she sidestepped a deep puddle, their eyes met through the Jeep's windshield. He stared straight ahead, sodden and blank, like he'd just survived drowning.

"Can I help you?" she asked. She had to raise her voice to be heard over the rain battering her poncho.

He looked at her vaguely.

“I have to get to the field for practice.”

"What’s the matter, then?"

Dex canted his head to the side, blinked, and seemed to see her a little clearer.

"I can’t drive,” he said. He touched his bandaged hand to the gear shift. Couldn't one of the other players have given him a ride or something?

"Isn't your brother around to drive you?"

"He's got class for another hour, FFA meeting after that."

"Oh." Nore shot one last glance at her bike, then gripped the handle of the Jeep's door. She didn't have work at the Catfish King for another hour and a half. She recalled that feeling of Coach Jenkins yapping at her to shut her mouth and come to the front of the classroom, as if she were a small, insolent child, or a yowling cat. Her anger had stung for hours afterward like the slow burn of sun-blistered skin. But now here was Dex, vulnerable, and it made her feel taller, the rain almost warm.

"I'll drive you."

"What?" Dex blinked and leaned closer to hear her.

"I can drive you to practice."

He considered her for a moment longer. Then he passed Jeep's keys to her, dropping them into her hand at the end of a green lanyard.

She got her bike from the gutter drain and wheeled it up behind the front seats. Then, she hoisted herself into the Jeep's raised cab while Dex trudged around to the passenger side. Nore tossed her bag and the dripping poncho into the mud-spattered floorboards. Dex closed the door and the staccato of the rain faded to a dull tapping on the Jeep's soft top.

"You know how to drive stick?"

"Well, yeah," she said. She didn't mention that she only had a permit, and an expired one at that—her mother had been too busy to go back to the DMV with her, and now Nore just figured she'd have to wait until she was eighteen.

She twisted the key in the ignition. She grasped the stick and slid her feet against the clutch, then the gas, and reversed out of the parking lot. The engine coughed and choked, and the smell of gasoline leached into the cab along with a fine white smoke. A vein stood out in Dex's jaw, and he slapped the dash like it was a person choking, and he was trying to dislodge something caught in their throat.

"That won't do anything," Nore said, keeping her voice as even as she could.

"I know," Dex said.

They came to a stop sign. The engine idled and stalled, then died. Nore cranked it twice before it grumbled back to life. Dex kicked the floorboards.

"Piece of shit. Just changed the plugs on it a week ago."

Nore drummed her fingers on the glass-smooth wheel.

"I might could take a look at what's wrong. I have a hunch it's the carburetor." she said.

Dex lifted one eyebrow, disbelief slightly curling his lip.

"You sure it's not just the fuel relay? My pop reckons we should replace it soon."

His disdain, instead of raising her hackles, had the opposite effect of dropping her defenses. Her ears and armpits prickled with heat, and her mouth filled with saliva, like she'd just placed a penny on her tongue. If he only understood about her—if Boone had understood about her—neither one of them would have looked at her like Dex regarded her now: as someone who needed instruction, to be coddled. At seventeen, it would not occur to her that what she offered next would be to hold open a door to someone she

barely knew. She thought, like she always did, only looking one step ahead, no lifting her eyes to see what lay at the end of the path.

"Look, I have some of my dad's tools at my house. I bet you ten bucks your carburetor's needle valve has a leak."

Dex

She worked like a seasoned gearhead, hands black to the wrists with grease, the float bowl, throttle, gaskets, and springs of his Jeep's carburetor disassembled on a piece of newspaper beneath her carport. The rain pattered on the carport's tin roof, and the door to the tool shed gaped. The reflective surfaces inside the shed gleamed with tiny points of light, and Dex had the briefest impression of several eyes peering out of the gloom, watching them.

"When your engine's running rich," Nore was saying, "you can't just check the plugs or the relay. You have to check the carb, too."

Dex wanted to ask her how she knew all of this. But his pride had been injured, so he just sat on the cinderblock steps leading up to the house and watched her. She crouched over the husk of the carburetor with a toothpick dug into the float valve, explaining as she went along:

"So, I'll clean this out, and put it all back together. Then, we'll blast some air through the assembly to make sure we got every last bit of dirt. It'd be a good idea to put in a new inline filter between the gas tank and the carb, if you can pick one up."

She looked up at him, her face so full of a bright, anxious fervor that he suddenly found himself charmed. If she hadn't given him that look, that clear desire for his

approval, he might have just slipped some money into her locker the next day as thanks. Instead, he rose from the steps and moved closer to her, bent over to inspect her work.

"Yeah," he said softly, "that looks great. How'd you learn this stuff?"

She smiled. When she smiled, he realized she was pretty—not in an obvious way like Alma, who possessed a healthy and athletic, but feminine, beauty—Nore's looks were earthy, almost careless. Her eyes were a pale gray-green, she had sturdy but slender limbs, long hair the color of a polished pine floor, a freckled nose.

"My dad taught me," she said. She flicked her eyes toward the shed. "He started up the garage off 87. Wilson's Auto."

"I know that place. My pop might have taken his truck in there last year, brake pads, I think."

She dropped her gaze to the spread-out newspaper.

"Some other guy owns it now. We sold the name to him."

The Jeep's engine ticked, and woodpecker drilled against someone's gutters down the street.

"I better get this back together." Nore cupped the carburetor's float bowl in her hands like an egg. "It'll get dark soon."

He plugged in the air compressor while she assembled the parts and screwed them back in next to the engine. She shot air through the valves until all the fluid was cleared, then hooked the fuel line back up. Nore wiped her hands clean on a rag from the kitchen, then she climbed into the Jeep, depressed the clutch, and cranked the engine. It chugged to life, spluttered once, then purred.

She grinned at him through the windshield. A childlike grin, the simple triumph of a job done right. He got in next to her and they drove into downtown, toward the stadium.

"Tell you what," Dex said as the stadium lights became visible over the tops of the buildings, "how 'bout I buy you something at the Sonic?"

They were at the stoplight before the turn-in for the stadium. She paused for a moment when the signal turned green.

"What about practice?"

"Screw it," he said.

That youthful smile again, tinged with mischief. Nore drove past the stadium, pulled into the Sonic. He passed her money for two Coke floats, and she tipped the car hop with a jaunty flick of her wrist. They ate the ice cream in a comfortable silence, the only sounds the occasional scrape of their plastic spoons against the Styrofoam cups.

Unease settled into Dex's insides, chillier than his last swallow of vanilla soft serve. His car was parked at the Sonic, where just about everyone in Fergus came after work for cold drinks and ice cream, when his Jeep was supposed to be with the other football players' cars at the stadium. He had a girl with him, and they were eating ice cream together, and the girl was not his girlfriend. He chucked his empty cup at a nearby trash can. It bounced off the rim and rolled under a nearby Taurus.

"Um," he said, "I think you need to take me back to the high school now. Reggie gets out of his FFA meeting soon."

Nore licked a glob of whipped cream off her spoon.

“I’m almost done. Can’t he wait?”

“Not really.” It had come out harsher than he meant, though he wasn’t angry. Just nervous.

She set her cup in her lap and gave him a long, prying look. Then, as though she suddenly understood she turned the key in the ignition with a hard snap, reversing out of the spot with her mouth pinched in a line. She threw her unfinished float out the window. She got her bike out of the Jeep’s backseat when they got to the high school.

“Hey, thanks,” Dex called after her.

She glanced behind her once, shoulders curved over the handlebars.

“Don’t mention it,” she said, and pedaled away. He watched her shrinking figure until it disappeared around the corner of the school.

CHAPTER 5

The day after Dex skipped practice, Coach Maddox met him at the door of his second-period calculus class, face stormy.

"Langley," he barked, "in the hall."

Dex followed and shut the classroom door.

Maddox pointed at Dex's bandaged hand. The coach’s forehead shone, and his upper lip sported a little sweat mustache.

"You may not be able to catch anything for a few weeks, but that don't mean you can stop working out. All that muscle you been working hard to put on those bones, you got to keep it in shape. Doc Kingston's gonna do some alternative workouts with you when the other boys are lifting, but I want you at *every* practice, hear? You got to know how Kovar's throwing, how Johnson's blocking. I want you to know if every goddamned one of them's innards are either stopped up or regular. I got no use for a player that lights out when the gridiron gets a little gritty. Hear?"

"Yes, sir."

The coach gave Dex a stiff nod and retreated down the hall. Dex ducked back into his math class. He rested his hand on the desk; there really wasn't much he could do if he couldn't write. The little Greek letters the teacher had chalked on the blackboard marched into a single fuzzy white line as he stared past the board, eyes unfocusing

Before his injury, a personal visit from Coach Maddox would have left him quaking in boots. But now. He'd just been chewed out by arguably one of the most powerful men in town, and he'd barely broken a sweat. For some reason, ever since his strange afternoon with Nore Wilson, everything that used to matter so much had stopped mattering. Or maybe that was just his hand—maybe losing control over something small had a ripple effect on the rest of your life, and set in motion a kind of circular domino effect so you couldn't see end from beginning.

He tried to focus back on the equations on the board. They were studying limits. *The limit of a constant, regardless of the value x approaches, is always the constant. The limit of a product is equal to the product of the limits of the other factors.*

The morning before he was to have surgery on his hand, he came upon his parents in deep discussion at the breakfast table. Reggie was not awake yet. His mother moved between the table and the stove, where bacon popped and crackled in the old cast iron skillet. His father sat at the table with a mug of coffee in one hand, the other spread across a jumble of papers spilled out of a worn manila folder.

"What if we move some from that CD you set up a few years ago?" his mother said. She scraped a spatula beneath the bacon.

"I was aiming to leave that one alone," his father said. "They ding you if you try to take any out too soon."

"Well," his mother began to say, then looked up and saw Dex standing in the doorway.

"Morning, sweetie," she said, and glanced at his father, who rose from the table and gestured at Dex's bandaged hand with his coffee mug.

"How're you feeling this morning?" he asked.

Dex twitched his right arm. "Fine, I guess," he said. He tried to get a closer look at the table but his father slid the folder over the papers. Guilt seeped into his already anxiety-nauseous stomach. He hoped he'd be able to make it to the surgeon's office without getting sick.

"Be right as rain this time next week, I'm willing to bet," his father said. "Back on the field where those scouts can get a good look at this year's state champs."

"Yeah, Pop," Dex said. He tried to smile but it was like trying to walk after your leg went to sleep. He wanted to ask about the money. But asking about the money would be worse than not asking.

“Dex, breakfast?” his mother called from the kitchen.

“No. Not hungry,” he said.

Reggie came into the kitchen then, rubbing sleep out of one eye. His mother bustled to plate up some bacon for him.

Dex thumbed the edge of the gauze on his wrist and wandered into the family room. He walked by the old black-and-white television in its walnut cabinet his father had carved for his mother as a wedding present, and went to the window. Pines and hardwoods ringed their house on all sides, save for the long drive cut through to the road. They didn’t need barbed wire fences out there; the trees kept everything out.

A nerve in his hand twinged and he tried to picture what it might look like, his hand opened up beneath the surgeon's knife. He pictured the diagram from his Anatomy & Physiology book, the bones of the hand: phalanges, carpals, metacarpals.

Dr. Truman's assistant, a pretty nurse in light blue scrubs, inserted the needle of an IV drip into Dex's right elbow. He sat in a partially reclined surgery chair, hand strapped to a wheeled operating table. She went out, and a different doctor came into the room and introduced himself as the anesthesiologist. He tapped a syringe and poised it before the injection port taped to Dex's arm, but before he could insert it, Dex spoke.

"I'm just going under a local anesthesia, right? That's what Doc Truman said."

The doctor smiled at him.

"That's right. You know the difference between local and general?"

"Uh-huh, I.... kind of want to go into surgery. When I'm done with ball, you know."

"That's great, kid," the doctor said. "Don't see many boys like you come through here saying that." He touched the pump on the syringe so a drop squeezed out. "This might make you a little sleepy, but it won't knock you out. Then we'll numb your arm for Dr. Truman. You'll relax and won't move around too much."

"Got it," Dex said.

The doctor pressed the needle into the injection port. Drowsiness crept over Dex's mind like a warm blanket. Then Doctor Truman was in the room, the pink crown of his head shiny in the surgery lamp's glare. Pressure on Dex's wrist and hand. The pretty nurse in blue, a paper mask over her nose. All he could see of her face her eyes, the same

color as her scrubs. She passed the doctor wires thin as fishing line. K-wires, Doc Truman had called them. To sew his bones back together, make him whole again.

He clambered up out of his stupor as they put the finishing touches on his cast. His mouth was gummed with sour congealed spit. The nurse pressed a button on the wall and his chair eased up until he was fully upright. Before they'd put the cast on, he'd seen the wire sticking out of his hand, tiny steel bolts on the ends to keep them from pulling out.

His parents came into the examination room. His mother was looking at him, worry pinching her face.

"He might be a little loopy for an hour or two," Doc Truman said. "The sedative sometimes does that. Want a wheelchair to take him out to your car?"

"No," Dex said. His tongue was thick against his teeth, "I got it."

"You sure, pumpkin?" his mother asked. "You look a little out of it."

"He's got it," his father said. "He's a big man."

Alma came over that same afternoon. Her father dropped her off, so there she would be there until she called him to come take her home.

"How's the patient doing?" she said as she came into the family room. She brought with her a pan of cookies, as well as a piece of poster board folded in half and covered in signatures penned in different-colored markers. She sat down in one of the floral wing-back chairs angled next to the couch. "This is from the High-Steppers." She

laid the oversized card onto his lap. She pitched her voice lower. “And these are from me,” she held out the tray of cookies.

Dex was stretched out on the couch watching the A&M versus Rice game. The Aggies were killing it, beating those private-school pansies into the dirt.

Dex’s mother came into the room.

“Hey there, Alma,” she said. “Been too long since I’ve seen you over here.”

“Oh, it has! I’ve missed seeing y’all.”

His mother took the other chair. Alma offered her a cookie but she declined with a smile.

“No, no, let Dex have ‘em all. He’s going to be laid up for a few days, I’m afraid.”

“I’m not hungry,” he said.

Alma looked at her lap, long lashes brushing the tops of her cheeks. For the second time that day, guilt twitched in his gut. And he had a headache to boot, nearly always the end result of too much of his belly-aching.

“But thanks for making ‘em, babe.”

His girlfriend brightened. She slid her palm into his left and brushed his knuckles with her thumb.

His mother rose from the chair. “Alma, you staying for supper? I’m making pork chops.”

“Do you need any help? You’re pork chops are always so good, I’d love to see how you fix it.”

"No, you stay put," his mother said, her eyes sparkling with pleasure.

Alma waited for a few minutes after his mother left. Then, she slipped out of the chair and laid down beside Dex on the couch: nose-to-nose, her hips just inches from his groin.

"Hi," she whispered, gripping his bicep.

"Hey there," Dex said. Now she had his attention. Alma tilted her head and pressed a light kiss to his mouth. His mother wasn't the kind to poke into rooms at awkward moments, like he'd heard some of his friends mothers did, leaving you alone for a suspicious amount of time before reappearing, so quiet it was like they'd built a secret passageway. But he still had to be careful.

"I've missed you this week," she said.

"I haven't gone anyplace."

"No... But you haven't been, *there*, you know?"

Dex sighed. "What do you mean?"

"I don't know. You're mind's been elsewhere, I can tell. Your hand's really making you worry. I wish you wouldn't. You're going to get a scholarship no matter what."

"You don't know that."

"But I do," Alma said, her voice low, breath soft against his cheek. "You're smart and talented and I know you'll get onto any team you want, any school you want."

She wriggled closer. She was perfect. It was perfect lying next to her. He should be happy.

The past spring, her parents had started fighting. Even before that, from the little comments Alma occasionally dropped, he'd never gotten the sense that her parents' marriage was a particularly happy one. They were religious, and most God-fearing folks in town chose to remain in unhappy situations rather than face the infamy of divorce. But one day in late June, she confessed to him that she'd overheard her parents utter the dreaded d-word.

"It's like they were just waiting around for my brother and me to move out of the house so they could split up without feeling guilty," she told him. She'd been crying so much her eyes were red and almost swollen shut.

She started asking him to sneak out to be with her. In any other situation, this would have been a dream come true. Dex would get up at one in the morning, back the Jeep down his parents' dark, tree-lined road with the headlights off, and drive the fifteen miles into Fergus to her house. She'd slip out the guest room window and climb into his Jeep. They would go out to the water tower, which sat on the highest hill in the county. If there was a moon, they'd watch it set. If there wasn't, they'd watch the occasional streak of headlights along I-20.

Sometimes, they would kiss—but never more than that. It would be unwise, she said, to make any big decisions when her heart was in such fragile shape. Mostly, he held her. She said the only place she ever felt safe, the only place she could get any sleep, was in his arms. He liked that. She would fall asleep with her head against his chest, and he'd suffer the most spectacular hard-ons. He thought to himself, *this is what it is to suffer for*

love. And he did love her. He fell in love with her that summer wanting to protect her, to shoulder her pain for her.

His left arm was trapped beneath him. He draped his cast awkwardly over her ribs and held her. They started kissing. Surprise/miracle number one: she let him roll on top of her. His left hand freed, he grasped her waist where her jeans and t-shirt met. He slid his hand under her shirt onto the butter-smooth skin. This was crazy. His mother could come in at any moment. This was the point where Alma would squirm away, her cheeks pink and eyes bright.

But she didn't. Surprise/miracle number two: he crept his hand higher and higher and she sighed. His fingertips found the elastic of her sports bra. Then his luck ran out—now she was edging out from beneath him, blinking, tucking her hair behind her ears.

"Sorry," Dex said dully.

"No, it's fine. I'm—I'm going to help your mom in the kitchen." She got up, pressed her hands to her cheeks, then walked out of the room.

Since the start of the school year, his feelings of love had soured a little. Her parents saw a counselor. They still weren't happy, but the divorce was now on hold. If he had to admit it, he was actually a little jealous of her. Alma had ambition in spades, to say the least. She was number two in the class to his number thirteen. She had big plans to go to A&M and study for her CPA. When they'd first started dating, Dex used to jokingly say to her, "Don't let me be a distraction!"

The past year, it had become less and less of a joke.

On the TV, Gary Kubiak threw to Johnny Hector. Dex watched the pass complete, heard the crowd cheer. He turned up the volume so he couldn't hear his mother and girlfriend talking in the kitchen.

Nore

Her mother came in at seven to wake her up for church. She'd coiled her blonde hair in curlers and wore a green-and-white hibiscus dress Nore had never seen before. It was the wrong dress for October. Too, tropical, too daring in the amount of knee it showed.

"You should wear that blue skirt. I haven't seen it on you in ages," her mother said as Nore robotically looked through her closet.

"Mmm," Nore murmured. Her mother preened before the long mirror affixed to the back of the door.

They were late. Her mother circled the parking lot of First Baptist searching for empty spots, her fingernails—she'd painted them red—tapped nervously against the wheel. They ended up having to park down the street. Her mother hustled despite the three-inch heels she wore. Once inside, they wandered halls of classrooms, but her mother couldn't find the one she was looking for. As they hurried, Nore's blue skirt, which hadn't really fit her since eighth grade, kept bunching up around her waist. Finally, they found a paunchy old man with white hair who was ducking into each classroom with an attendance clipboard.

He pointed them in the direction of the stairs. "Adult classes down in the basement," he said.

The basement had brick walls painted glossy white just like the ones at the high school. It smelled of bleach and mildew and stale perfume. At last, they passed by a door with the placard, Adult Classroom II: Assistant Pastor Mark Palmer.

"Let's just wait, Mom," Nore pleaded. "Class has already started."

Her mother stiffened her back and adjusted the hem of that green dress.

"I'm not waiting," she hissed, and then turned the knob. Nore prayed, *Lord, let this door open unto the back of thy classroom*. You always talked to God using *thou* and *thy*. She wasn't sure exactly why—only that her father always had.

No such miracle occurred. The minute her mother opened the door, the first thing to greet them was Mr. Palmer's profile standing before a lectern. The entire class of middle-aged men and women shifted slightly in their metal folding chairs, eyes sliding from the pastor to Nore and her mother.

Her mother tucked a blonde curl behind one ear and adopted that girlish, apologetic timbre she'd used when the pastor had come over for dinner.

"Sorry, y'all. Got lost!" she chittered.

Mr. Palmer's eyebrows had scrunched into pale caterpillars behind his glasses when the door first opened, but now they smoothed. He waved toward the back of the classroom.

"Have a seat, Mrs. Wilson. We're just getting started."

They sat. Mr. Palmer resumed the lesson.

"'But let him ask in faith, nothing wavering. For he that wavereth is like a wave of the sea driven with the wind and tossed. For let not that man think that he shall receive

any thing of the Lord. A double minded man is unstable in all this ways.' And that, brothers and sisters, is why we need to cultivate minds of unwavering steadfastness. Saint James says, 'count it all joy when ye fall into temptation...that the trying of your faith worketh patience.' You all might say to yourselves, 'Well, I was trusting in the Lord's power to heal when my sister got leukemia, or for my unbelieving brother to accept Christ, and it never came to pass. So I gave up believing.'

"Well, brothers and sisters, we can't let the temporal things of this world impact our place in eternity. We got to keep on keeping on. Hebrews ten: thirty-six, 'For ye have need of patience, that, after ye have done the will of God, ye might receive the promise.' I was just talking to Brother Geller the other day over coffee, and he had such an impactful story, I wanted him to share it with you all."

Mr. Palmer cupped a hand in the air and lifted it, and a thick man with worker's hands and a black mustache rose from his chair.

The man cleared his throat. "For years and years I put my faith in the ground, I guess. I made a lot of money few years back working the oilfields. It's a round-the-clock job. When I wasn't tripping pipe with my buddies I was drinking or smoking dope or shooting the craps in the pool hall. I was sleeping in Sundays and was always sneering at those Bible-thumpers who came around talking about getting right with the Lord. Seemed like a waste of time, if you asked me. I got all I need provided by the work of my own two hands. Welp," he twisted a thick gold ring on his finger, his knuckles standing out white against his browned skin. "Then I got hurt. Real bad. Broke my arm and collarbone and some ribs when a well blew out. Laid me up for two months. No one came to visit

me, not a friend in the world. So, I was laying there feeling so sorry for myself. Must have been two in the morning. Then, this voice started speaking, right there on the hospital ward. It said, 'Georgie, you've forsaken me. You've forgotten how much I love you.'

"I was so staggered, hearing this voice, I climbed out of that hospital bed and got down on my knees and prayed for God's forgiveness. And I wasn't supposed to get out for another two weeks! I came home three days later. And I haven't touched whiskey or dope or so much as played Go-Fish since." He sat. Everyone in the room applauded, their faces shining in the buzzing fluorescent lights.

After the lesson concluded, a woman passed out Styrofoam cups of coffee and pieces of pound cake on cocktail napkins. The chairs were put away and people milled about, conversing quietly or lining up to talk with the pastor. Nore's mother patted her hair and clutched a cup of coffee and joined the line.

Her mother apologized to the pastor for showing up late.

"Don't you worry. It's a blessing to have you and your daughter here with us this morning," he said.

"I was real struck by that lesson today. And it was so kind of you to come and share the Word with us the other night. I just wish I didn't have to work so much. It's real hard being a widow."

The pastor squeezed her mother's shoulder.

"The Lord commands the brethren to look after the widows and orphans. It's our job. We're here for you."

"Mom," Nore said, "let's let the folks behind us talk to Pastor Palmer."

Her mother glanced behind her, saw the line stretching back to the table with the cake and coffee.

"You go right on up to the sanctuary," Mr. Palmer said. He looked at Nore. "If you all come back next Sunday, which I pray you will, the Youth meet up in Room 217B. I think they're studying Daniel."

Her mother loitered in the back of the sanctuary to talk to Mr. Palmer after the service, too. Nore wanted to crawl under one of the pews, like she'd done at the Methodist church as a little girl, and hide there. Her mother invited the pastor out to lunch with them. He smiled and squeezed her arm again and said he had other sheep in the flock to minister to that day, but he sure appreciated the gesture.

It was nearly one p.m. by the time they got home. Nore was starving. Her mother's mood had deflated considerably. While Nore heated up some tuna-potato chip-casserole, her mother sat at the kitchen table with a scowl on her face and a Newport clutched between two red nails. Nore brought two plates of casserole to the table. It was one of her mother's staples: canned tuna with potato chips, onion, cream of mushroom soup, cheddar cheese. She scarfed hers down but her mother didn't touch hers, just kept moodily smoking. Nore got herself a second helping. Midway through that plate, her mother stood and shoved her untouched casserole across the table.

"You shouldn't eat that, Nore," she said bitterly. "It's fattening. No boy's going to date you if you eat like that." She went into the bathroom and shut the door. After a few minutes, Nore heard the hiss of water hitting the shower wall.

Nore finished her serving of casserole. She ate her mother's, too. So full she thought she might ralph, she reached for the packet of Newports and helped herself to one. The clock's tick over the table clanged in her ears.

After her father died, her mother had gotten fat. Nore remembered her grandmother once saying, "You got to feed grief like you do a cold." Gertie had dug into the litany of casseroles and homemade bread and pies the neighbors left on their doorstep without seeming to taste anything. She just smoked and ate and watched *General Hospital* with the volume turned down. She didn't lose the weight for two years, until she got on at the Carnation plant and worked on her feet nine hours a day. Even after that, when getting dressed before going on a date with the various stoop-shouldered, mouth-breathing men that started coming around, she'd look in the mirror, pinch the flesh behind her arms or around her middle and say, "Don't you end up like me, Nore. Old and fat and alone." She'd say it with a brittle kind of humor, anticipating Nore's response, "You're crazy, mommy," like a punch line, but not really heeding her daughter's reassurance, either.

Once, when she was in seventh grade, Nore had stuffed the cups of her training bra with toilet paper before leaving for school. She hadn't done it out of vanity, exactly, more just to see what it would be like to have breasts. At breakfast that morning, her mother had considered Nore's chest for a long, quiet moment before placing a plate of eggs before her.

"You might just be bigger than me in a few years," her mother said, smiling. Like before, her mother's brightness was double-edged, a lilt of envy coloring that smile. Nore

gradually began to dread her mother's praises as much as her criticisms. Both left her feeling ashamed, as though her mother deemed everything about her to be a disappointment.

That afternoon, Nore biked over to her friend Patricia's house. Patricia lived in the mobile home park up on Bishop's Hill with her father and older brother. Her father, Gil Lamar, worked at a warehouse that leased drilling equipment. The brother, Nick, was twenty and roughnecked in the fields with a bunch of other recent Fergus High grads, including Patricia's longtime crush Lonnie Rawlins.

Though the Lamars lived in a doublewide, they weren't hurting for money. Mr. Lamar had built a deck in the back that overlooked an above-ground pool. The deck had a clay chiminea and a big gas grill and padded Adirondack chairs. In the summer, Nore's favorite place in the world was that deck. She and Patricia and Dollie (whenever Dollie could get time off from babysitting her nieces and nephews) would lay out in those chairs, roast weenies in the chiminea when the sun went down. Mr. Lamar ringed the pool with tiki torches to keep away mosquitoes, and Nore liked the way flames' reflections fluttered across the water.

When Nore came into the den, she found Mr. Lamar and Nick in the living room setting up a huge television. Cans of Bud Light littered their workspace along with a detritus of screws, bolts, and scraps of plastic. A sedan-sized cardboard box leaning against the couch displayed the label: Transvision Vidimax 560.

"Ordered it from the Sears catalogue," Mr. Lamar said. "Bonus finally came in for a big rig I sold few months back." He wiped his forehead on the sleeve of his LSU Tigers t-shirt and resumed screwing together pieces of the particleboard entertainment cabinet that had come with the television.

Nick fiddled with the wires on some hulking black box with plastic buttons all across one end. Patricia came in from the kitchen carrying cans of grape Crush for her and Nore to drink.

"What's that?" Nore pointed to the black box in Nick's arms with her soda can.

"VCR," Patricia said, looking not much interested. "You know my Dad and brother, always want the newest toy. We actually had one before this, but it was shit. Chewed up all my Jane Fonda workout tapes."

Patricia had moved with her father and brother from Shreveport almost two years ago, in the dead of February in tenth grade. Her parents were divorced and her mother worked for Southwest in Dallas as a flight attendant. The school Patricia had gone to in Louisiana was much bigger than Fergus High, and located in the middle of the city, and so she brought with her a certain air of rebelliousness and sophistication. She wore fishnets and fingerless gloves and faux-leather skirts the teachers at Fergus were always going after with rulers. She listened to Madonna albums and was openly critical of the soupy, crooning country ballads the moms in Fergus like to go weepy over. The other girls at Fergus High had given Patricia a wide berth, to say the least.

But Nore had been drawn in by her glamor and air of world-weariness. She was the first to inform Nore that everyone in Fergus was incorrectly pronouncing the name of

Lovell County (they said it low-VELL, instead of love-ell). Patricia was the first to explain that skipping pep rallies to smoke out by the Ag barn would earn Nore endless suspicion, but that it was a necessary sacrifice to make in the name of protesting Fergus's hatefully patriarchal hierarchy (Patricia had read *The Feminine Mystique*). Nore's friendship with Dollie was one of safety, comfort, the known. Patricia was a window, a keyhole through which Nore could peer and glimpse the wider world.

Patricia and Nore took their sodas out to the deck and settled into the chairs with some copies of *Seventeen* and *Rolling Stone*. The weather was warm, not unusual for late October. There was a bowl of Halloween chocolate on the coffee table and someone—probably Nick—had threaded purple string lights and garlands of plastic spiders along the railings.

Nick came out onto the deck, went down the steps to the backyard, and stuck a hand in the pool to guess its temperature. The cover hadn't been drawn over the water yet, and so pine needles and leaves carpeted the surface in sodden brown. He got out a long-handled net and began scooping out the debris. He wore a ragged Booker T. Washington High School Athletics shirt. The thick chords of his arms, a result of the two years he'd been roughnecking, were prominent as he hefted the dripping mats of leaves. All the Lamars were on the short side, built solid with thick legs and arms, but balanced out by their oddly aristocratic faces: delicate noses, cleft chins, and both Patricia and Nick had long-lashed, soft gray eyes.

"It may be warm out, but not *that* warm," Patricia called.

"Dad's gonna let me turn the pool's heater on later," Nick said, "have it nice and warm for when some of my buddies come over. Want to join us, Nore?" Nick came up to the deck and tapped his Bud Light against her soda can. "You haven't seen how awesome this deck looks when these lights are on." He went to the edge and plugged the end of the string lights into an orange extension cord. It was sunny out, so there wasn't much change in the deck's atmosphere.

"You just wait," Nick continued. "It looks pretty rad at night."

"*I* think it makes the backyard look like a strip joint," Patricia said, still frowning.

"Hey, I'm cool with that," Nick said, then pointed at his sister and imitated her scowl. "So long as you stay in your room the whole time."

"I thought you wanted us to be there?" Nore said.

"I was talking to *you*, not my sister."

"Gross. Go back inside and finish wiring that bomb or whatever it is you and dad are hooking up in there," said Patricia.

Nick smirked, but went inside. The sliding glass door hissed shut behind him.

Patricia threw her soda can on the deck and crushed it with her Chuck Taylors.

They picked up their magazines.

"You heard from your mom?" Nore asked after a little while.

Patricia brightened.

"Yeah, actually. She says she got some free flight vouchers, wants to take a trip to Acapulco, just me and her."

"That's sweet."

"Yeah. She says it could be last-minute, though. She can't always predict when she's gonna have a free weekend, you know. Delays and closings and stuff."

"Well, if she can swing it, I think you should go. Be nice to get the hell out of Fergus for a little while."

"Yeah," Patricia twisted and glanced behind her into the house. Nore looked, too, and saw that Patricia's father and Nick were playing with the TV's remote control, flipping between channels so quickly that the walls of the living room flickered, like flashes of flame or lightning.

The sun dropped behind the trees. Nore realized the hour was further along than she thought, and given the time it took to bike from Patricia's to the Catfish King, she would be late for work. She told Patricia good-bye, slung her backpack over her shoulder, and dashed through the house.

"Where you going in such a hurry?" Mr. Lamar called as Nore fiddled with the latch on the front door.

"Work. Late."

"Nick'll drive you. You can put your bike in the back of the truck."

Normally, she resisted people driving her places. If she couldn't drive her own car, her bike was the next best thing—time to be alone, feel the road under her command. But under these circumstances....She'd been late the previous day, and was worried she'd get written up for repeat offense.

"Okay," Nore said.

So they rolled her yellow Schwinn up into the bed of the Lamars' Chevy LUV and drove down Bishop's Hill. A Loretta Lynn song came on the radio when Nick turned it on, but he quickly flipped the dials until he found KBWC, broadcasted out of Marshall. As far as Nore was aware, it was the single R&B station in East Texas. Nick was the only guy she knew who didn't like country music.

"Marvin Gaye, man," Nick said. "Doesn't get any better."

"I don't really listen to music," Nore said.

Nick raised his eyebrows in mock affront.

"What? Everyone likes music."

"Not me."

He blew a raspberry. "That's just because it's all Podunk tunes around here. I'll get you the good stuff. I'll make you a tape."

"You don't have to do that."

"Sure I do. I'm a nice guy."

"Right."

They turned off the Bishop's Hill road and onto Route 87. They pulled up to the Catfish King. Nick helped her get the bike out of the pickup bed.

Before he drove off, he said, "See you on Saturday."

Nore had no intention of going to Nick's party. But she nonetheless felt flattered to be asked. She changed into her work clothes in the employee restroom as quick as she could and jabbed her timecard into the clock. Her manager, Woody, gave her the hairy eyeball when she opened the register to count the money, but said nothin

CHAPTER 6

Three weeks of lifting kettle bells strapped to his forearms since he couldn't do bench press. Three weeks of flipping tires one-handed, of his cast throwing him off balance during ladder drills, three weeks watching film and listening to Maddox holler himself hoarse, and three weeks of being unable to do anything about it because on Friday nights he had to sit on the bench. After the near-loss to Coburn the Friday before Halloween, the Falcons pulled up short to the Hooper Jayhawks, their embarrassment doubled by not putting any points on the board. Despite the loss to Hooper, the Falcons' record was good enough that they were still on the bracket. Unluckily for them, their first opponent of the playoffs was to be the Quincey Aggies. Going into the playoffs after a tough loss was never an ideal situation—anyone who'd ever played knew football was ninety-percent a mental war with yourself—but going into the first District game against a team that so far had gone 10-0 was on another plane entirely.

Dex woke the morning of the game with a sore jaw, a result of grinding his teeth all night in a fitful sleep. Inside his cast, his hand was damp with sweat, and stank of the sour, cheesy smell of flesh gone too long unwashed. It no longer hurt. At breakfast he begged his father to drive him into Tyler to get Doc Truman to take the cast off a day early.

"I can't miss the first District game, Pop," Dex said as his mother tried fork a sausage round onto his plate. He flapped her hand away in an impatient gesture. "I'm not hungry, I already told you."

His father frowned over the top of his coffee mug.

"Dex, don't you go disrespecting your Mama."

"Sorry. But Pop, I feel fine. Great, actually. Coach needs me."

His father took his time answering. Dex's mother brought a fresh pan of sausage gravy from the stove, and his father spooned it over his biscuits, passed the pan to Reggie, who'd just emerged from the bathroom with his hair wet and eyes still fogged with sleep.

"Son," his father said, "Coach Maddox don't need you getting re-injured, not now. You got to have faith that your buddies can pull this one off without you."

Dex's stomach turned over queasily as he pondered the few actions left available to him.

The sun was just beginning to rake the tops of the trees when he and Reggie went out to the Jeep. Their breaths puffed thick clouds in the cold air. Dex usually preferred to wear his camo hunting coat, feeling that the green and gold of his letterman jacket was too gaudy, made him look a little like a leprechaun with his dark reddish hair. But today, he and Reggie were twins in their Fergus High jackets. Now that playoffs had arrived, the Junior Varsity got to suit up with the older players on Friday nights, ready to jump in the game if there was a comfortable enough margin, get a taste of Varsity experience so they

wouldn't be so green the next fall. Dex could almost taste his brother's excitement—keen like bite of woodsmoke in the air.

They pulled into the parking lot. Reggie threw Dex the keys like he'd done ever since he started driving, though this morning he waited a half-second longer before winging them. As if, now that he had one foot in Varsity, the gulf between him and Dex had shrunk. As if maybe he could start thinking of the Jeep as not just belonging to his older brother, but to him as well. Reggie walked into the school with definite buoyancy to his step, heels of his boots clapping the pavement cheerily. Anger stroked a stiff finger down Dex's spine. His brother hadn't taken his place, not yet. This was still Dex's season, his year, his time in the spotlight. He wasn't going to let something as little as a twenty-four-hour snag take that away, not if he could help it.

Coach didn't hold practice on Friday mornings, but he and Reggie were long in the habit of arriving to school early. Dex lingered in the parking lot, twirling the key ring around his left index finger, watching the buses pull up to the curb and expel yawning kids. Nore Wilson pedaled up on her yellow Schwinn and knelt to chain the bike to the gutter drain. Her hair, pulled up in a ponytail like always, caught the slanted November sun and turned, for a moment, from dull ash to bright, startling gold. That image would later come back to him, its almost unearthly surprise that made the bridge of his nose smart, like he'd inhaled pepper, or looked too quickly at a bright light upon waking.

She straightened and saw him looking at her. She held her hands stiff at her hips like there was an invisible gun holster there, and any wrong move of his would result in a quick-draw.

"Nore," Dex said, approaching her slowly. "Morning."

She looked to her left and right, as if there was some other Nore he'd meant to address.

He walked closer, so close that only the bike was between them, close so that only she could hear him speak.

"Look, so I know how you liked fixing my Jeep." He tried to chuckle, keep things light like he was flirting, but it came out more of a nervous whinny. "And well, I sort of need something else fixed, if you'll help me out."

She shifted her weight to one hip and rested her hand on it. He noticed she'd painted the nails dark purple. The color brought out a blue vein running the length of her hand, making it seem smaller, delicate even. Why did he suddenly want to pick it up, warm it in his own palm?

"Up here," Nore said dryly. He jerked his gaze back up to her face. "What do you want, Dex?"

He raised his cast between them. "My pop didn't have time to drive me to the doctor's office today. I'm supposed to get this taken off, but since the team leaves for the game right after the pep rally, there isn't time to go later."

Nore grasped her other hip. "What about your brother? Your mom?"

"Reggie has a test today. Mom doesn't really drive." The first was a lie, but the second part was true. Dex's mother didn't even have a license. She'd let it expire after she married Dex's father. "A man takes care of his woman, son," his pop was fond of saying.

Nore's eyebrows lifted a little, and she crossed her arms.

"Listen," Dex said, fighting to keep his voice calm and beseeching, even as the back of his neck began to redden with anger and embarrassment, "I'd sure appreciate you doing me another good turn. I'd owe you."

Now he had her interest, he could tell. She uncrossed her arms and stuck her hands into the back pockets of her jeans.

"You'd owe me," she mused. "Do you get to pick how you're gonna repay the favor, or do I?"

Dex chewed his lip. Clearly, if he was going to get what he wanted, he had to say she got to pick. But something made him nervous about consciously owing Nore Wilson an unconditional favor. Then again, he didn't really have much of a choice here.

"You pick."

She smiled. She looked really pretty when she smiled.

"A'ight, then."

Nearly an hour later, Nore put the Jeep into Park outside Dr. Truman's office in Tyler. Dex sat in the Jeep for a few seconds after she'd turned off the engine, examining the red berries of a holly bush in the office complex's manicured landscaping.

"You don't really have an appointment, do you?" Nore asked.

"It's tomorrow," Dex said flatly.

Nore drummed her fingers on the wheel. Then she said, "You're eighteen, right?"

"Since September."

She shifted the keys from hand to hand. “Way I see it, you don’t need your parents’ consent. Just say what you need to and if they put up a fight point out that you’re an adult and you can make this decision.”

Dex rubbed at the stubble on his chin—he’d forgotten to shave that morning—and considered her. Alma would have put her foot down if she’d been in Nore’s place. She’d always been cagey about rules, would scowl if Dex so much as suggested seeing a different movie from the one they’d paid for at the box office. Dex looked back at the holly bush. It wasn’t cheating, being here with Nore, but from the swooping sensation in his belly, it still seemed like it. He pushed the feeling out of his mind.

“Come in with me?” he asked.

“Want me to hold your hand, too?” she smirked.

“Never mind,” he mumbled, and went inside the clinic.

The receptionist gave him a hard look when he told her he didn’t have an appointment, but after looking at his license she handed him the intake forms on a clipboard and said that Dr. Truman would be finished with his current patient in twenty minutes.

Dex filled out the forms as best he could with the shaky but efficient left-handed script he’d developed over the past few weeks, tapping the pen nervously against his boot heel. Then Dr. Truman came out, looking surprised to see him but no less welcoming, and ushered him back to the exam room.

“What seems to be the problem, Dex? Wasn’t expecting you ‘till tomorrow.”

"Well," Dex began, having had some time to come up with a cover story while he filled out the forms, "Doc Kingston's been tracking my progress, and he reckons I could go ahead and get the cast off, get a jump start on my PT."

Dr. Truman knitted his brow. "I don't think I received a call from Dr. Kingston. Did he make it after hours?"

Dex's mind spun. If he said Doc Kingston had called, would Truman swallow that story, or get up and call Kingston back?

"He might have. We were just jawing it over, so maybe he didn't."

"Hmm," Dr. Truman pulled Dex's file toward him and studied it.

"It hasn't hurt for about a week," Dex added, feeling desperate now, like this was all starting to slip away from him. "And I haven't needed those pain pills for almost two."

Dr. Truman took Dex's cast-wrapped hand and turned it gently in his palms.

"Thing is, you're right, I can take this off today, pull out the k-wires, and you should still heal normally. What worries me is, it's a Friday, and I don't want you playing on it for another few days more."

Sweat beaded in Dex's armpits, and he prayed Dr. Truman couldn't smell his fear.

"If I take this off today, I want you to promise me you won't suit up tonight. You wear a hand brace, you work with Doc Kingston on strengthening it, but you wait to get back on the field until next week."

But there might not be a next week. It could be all over tonight. The college scouts wouldn't see him wearing his pads and jersey, even if he was just on the bench. It had to be tonight.

"Okay," Dex said, "I swear."

When Dex emerged from the exam room, his hand feeling shriveled and light as a dollar bill, he was surprised to see Nore sitting by Dr. Truman's tropical fish tank, her nose close to the glass.

"Got tired of waiting," she said. She pointed at his freed hand. "Shackled no more."

He mustered a grin. "Yep. Just got to get a brace for it at the drugstore and we're good to go."

They found a Walgreens on the way back to Fergus. He bought a brace and, because he knew from Alma that the best way to please a woman was to surprise her, two Cokes from the fridge and a box of Reese's Pieces. He would have to get used to using his right hand again. Extricating his wallet from his back pocket proved dishearteningly more difficult than he anticipated.

Nore held the keys out to him when he came out of the store, though the look on her face was one of sadness, like she was turning loose a fox cub she'd nursed back into the wild.

"Keep 'em," Dex said. "My hand's still kind of weak."

She brightened and climbed back into the driver's seat. Dex pulled the Cokes from the paper Walgreens bag, uncapped one, and held it out to her.

"I'll have to give it back when I downshift," she said, but she seemed surprised, happy even. She swigged from the bottle, gave a satisfied smack. They munched the

candy all the way back to Fergus. Dex forgot for a little while about the ax that was the first playoff game dangling over his neck. Playing for the Falcons, with the entire town's hopes and collective pride riding on your shoulders, you grew up fast. There were times earlier in the season that he'd look in the mirror and be surprised to see a young man's face and body, instead of the aching, bruised, stress-worn old man he'd get to feeling like.

Riding in the Jeep with Nore, a window cracked and biting-cold air turning her hair into a wild streamer, he felt like a grown up and a kid all at once, like someone fully in control of his life without its responsibilities. This must be what college feels like, he thought.

Then they passed the sign for the town limits, and the weight settled back on his shoulders and feet. The Cokes' glass bottles rolled around emptied in the floorboards, and the box of Reese's Pieces no longer rattled. Even Nore came back to earth, cranking the window back up and her ponytail settling against her neck. The clock on the dash read 1:30. The pep rally took place in an hour, and then the players would load the buses to drive to the halfway spot agreed upon by the Aggies' and Falcons' coaches for the game.

"Well," Nore said. She pulled the keys from the Jeep and slid out, dropping them with a jingle onto the seat. She walked into the school without looking back at him.

Maddox saw Dex's hand the second before the team walked into the pep rally. They stood in the hall behind the gym, and through the open doors Dex could hear the band already blasting the fight song. The coach was striding to take his place at the head

of the line of players, and paused for a split second when he passed Dex. They locked eyes, and Dex could see he'd be the first one Maddox accosted before loading the buses. But now, there wasn't time for that. Now was the time to pass through the curtain of green and gold crepe streamers suspended from the door frame. Now was the time to watch the cheerleaders kick their tanned legs and chant, *Good luck, Hey-ey, lots of luck is coming your way, so take it again and let's begin. Hey-ey, good luck!* Now was the time to have the eyes of every kid in the school follow him with admiration, and jealousy, and expectation.

"I'm still not putting you in, not if I can help it," Maddox repeated for the seventh time as they waited in the locker room. "I'm gonna let you suit up, but that's it."

Dex curled his fingers in the hand brace. With the added support, his grip was a little stiff, but he felt strong. Strong enough to leave it all out there on the field if he had to, like his coaches had been telling him to do since he was five years old.

Dex stared at the gray, bubbled paint coating the concrete floor of the locker room. Then he raised them and met Maddox's eyes. Behind their usual hard flatness, Dex detected the glimmer of fear and hope behind them. Maddox wanted this win as badly as he did, but he needed it in a way Dex did not. This was his job. Coaches who couldn't bring home rings got booed out of town. Maddox would put Dex in the game if he got desperate, he could see that now.

"Okay, Coach," he said. "I just didn't want to sit in my civvies anymore, you know? It's my senior year." It had been Falcon lingo to call their street clothes "civvies,"

short for “civilians,” like army guys did, since long before Dex became one. That’s what it felt like a lot of the time, like their jerseys were battle garb they donned to defend the town’s reputation.

“I get it Dex, I do,” Maddox said, the chords of his neck visibly loosening as the tension drained from his shoulders. “I been where you are.”

The Quincey Aggies came out of their crimson and white inflatable football helmet full steam ahead. They put fourteen points on the board before the start of the second quarter. The Falcons fought their best to regroup, but were barely making downs, Kovar throwing two turnovers. This was going to be a rough-and-tumble ground game. By halftime, Fergus High had scraped together a touchdown and a two-point conversion so the board read 14-8. Dex’s replacement, junior Mike Berryhill, who usually played defensive end, was doing okay, not great, but okay. He didn’t have the rapport Dex shared with Kovar, or the mental agility to read the field that Dex knew to be his best strength.

After the halftime lungful from Maddox, Dex grabbed the sleeve of the head coach’s windbreaker on the way back to the sideline. He outright begged to get on the field. Maddox shook him off.

“I can’t do that Dex. You promised,” he said. But his resolve had to be crumbling, Dex knew it.

The Falcons got within field goal range after another turnover halfway through the third quarter. Shawn Rivet kicked, put the ball between the yellow posts, and brought

the score up to 14-11. Then the Aggies launched into a monster drive. There had been rumors floating around that their dynamic duo, seniors Scott Lancaster, quarterback, and Ezekiel Solanio, receiver, both had Big 12 offers. It was a little freaky to watch them. Lancaster would be blitzed on all sides, and then everything would just line up out of nowhere. The ball floated up out of his hands and found Solanio, who'd push the line of scrimmage forward with bursts of speed you didn't expect given his somewhat bulky frame. The Aggies were a well-oiled machine, and their fans knew it. They barely stood up to cheer anymore, their band played the fight song in a cursory way, like they'd gotten so used to winning this season it had become a tired habit. Now they were third and five, quivering over the Falcon's twenty yard line.

Maddox called a timeout. His face had gone from prune-dark to ashen so many times Dex was surprised he hadn't been carted over to the ambulance parked by the concession stand yet.

"Coach," Dex screamed, his voice cracking, "you gotta put me in!"

Maddox ignored him, but his shoulder twitched in the direction Dex had shouted. He thwacked defensive back Beau Lewis's helmet and pointed to the field. Dex put his head between his knees and stared at the trodden grass between his cleats. He waited for the announcer to declare the Aggies' touchdown.

Instead, he raised his eyes to see a scramble of red and gold helmets, heard a chorus of gasps from the crowd. The zebras cleared out of his line of sight and Beau Lewis was on his feet, arm punched into the air. The clock ran out for the third quarter, and the Falcons had reclaimed possession.

Fourteen minutes blinked on the scoreboard. The d-line jogged to the bench and the offense bit down on their mouth guards, jerked their chinstraps tight. Before he ran out to the field, Harris flashed Dex the thumbs up. The stadium lights trembled at the corners of Dex's vision. The Falcons' drive started its slog down the field. Berryhill fumbled two passes from Kovar and the second time held onto the ball by barely a pinky. Dex jumped to his feet, he was shouting, right hand aching as he made a fist and pumped it into his left palm.

Maddox called another timeout, babbled some plays at them, and sent the boys back to the field. The second before the ref blew the whistle to resume play, he spun and looked right at Dex.

"Langley, you warm?"

Dex pulled his helmet on in answer. Berryhill loped to the sideline and Dex was back in the game. The Falcons' crowd, who had been watching soberly for the last half hour, flared up with cheers.

Dex took his spot behind the line. There was the snap, and he was ducking and weaving and leapfrogging over the red-and-white jerseys of the Quincey players. He found a pocket and craned over his shoulder for Kovar's line of sight. His whole body went numb like it always had when Dex was on fire like this, nothing between his brain and the grass but air.

He caught Kovar's eyes. The ball connected with his right. The braced hand absorbed its full impact, the middle knuckle spasming. There was a seam in the Aggies' defense and he ripped along it, ball tucked beneath his armpit, cold air creaking in his

lungs. The safeties closed in until they'd nudged him out of bounds. The Falcons had gained twenty yards.

Dex tossed the pigskin to the ref and flexed his hand. It felt jarred, sure, and definitely fragile, but it had held up. Harris thumped Dex's pads with a whoop.

Kovar gave Dex an appreciative grin in the huddle, but he was still cagey about the passing game. "I don't wanna rely on you too much," he said to Dex. He elected to hand off the ball to halfback Lloyd Rutland. Dex ground his teeth in his into his mouth guard, but said nothing. They were going to have a short season if Kovar kept second-guessing himself.

But when Rutland took the handoff, three Aggie linebackers were waiting for him the second the crossed the line. Dex grappled with the cornerback, tried to make an opening. The cornerback's shoulder pads connected with his hand brace and pushed his fingers back. Dex felt the crack of pain in his knuckle in his ribs like a stitch after running too hard. Rutland went down, no yardage gained. Dex flexed his fingers. No break, but now he felt shaky, his head light.

Kovar passed to him on the next play, but now his confidence was shot. He gripped the ball dizzily, looking for breaks in the defense and seeing them, but unable to move. He went down in a tackle and came off his back spluttering, like he'd been dunked underwater. The next two plays, Dex caught the ball but again couldn't move his feet, the only thing on his mind the memory of that elbow smashing into his fingers, the weeks of feeling helpless and forgotten with his hand shackled in plaster. The Falcons failed to get a fourth down and possession reverted to the Aggies.

Maddox yanked him back on the bench. Dex watched the remainder of the game through a fog, his hand throbbing where it dangled off his knee, like a second heart that existed outside his body. Berryhill went back in.

In the end, it didn't matter that the Falcons couldn't sustain connections. Kovar and Berryhill managed a touchdown and extra point, bringing the score up 15-14, Falcons. The Aggies were poised to score again with a minute left in the game. It was all over. Then, as Solanio extended his arm to catch a Hail Mary from Lancaster, Falcons safety Randy Kemper grasped his jersey and brought him down. Both players skidded across the field. Kemper staggered to his feet, but Solanio did not.

Team trainers jogged out onto the field and both teams took a knee. Wind whistled through the stadium, silence growing the longer the Solanio lay on his back. After five minutes, Solanio was able to get to his feet, but from the way he leaned on the trainers' shoulders and hobbled on one leg, he'd most likely blown his knee. The Fergus players watched him limp off the field. Dex felt nauseous with horror and elation—his own knee twitched with a kind of sympathetic pain, and he knew that anguished look on Solanio's face all too well, that look like your best friend had just died in front of you. But this was it. This was the Falcon's chance to hold on to the threads of their unraveling post-season.

The Aggies regrouped their offense, but the lucky charm of the Lancaster-Solanio partnership had been shattered. The clock ran down with the Aggies six yards from the Falcons end zone. Fergus would put another District trophy into the school's mirrored case tonight, next to dozens of polished others.

But as Dex walked off the field toward the locker rooms, he didn't feel like a member of a winning team. Despite his best efforts, despite skipping school and lying to the doctor, it had all been for naught because his team hadn't needed him. He'd been so cowed by the possibility of re-injury that he'd choked, made a fool of himself.

When he came out of the locker room, his parents were waiting for him. His father stared at the hand brace, mouth pinched tight in an expression Dex hadn't seen him wear since Dex nearly wrecked the riding mower into a tree. He traced the Morse code of the stitching on his boots while his father scolded him for his idiocy.

Then, just as he was about to climb onto the bus, Alma found him, the sequins of her dance uniform glittering and stiff as chainmail.

"Dex!" she cried. "Y'all did it! You won!"

"No thanks to me," he said bitterly.

"You did fine," she said, reaching out to hug him. He let her do it, but didn't return the embrace. He did not want to feel congratulated, and hugging her back would be accepting hers. Undeterred, Alma peered up into his face as she gripped his arms.

"I wanted you to be the first to know," she breathed, "I was going to wait, but I can't anymore. I got my letter today. I got into A&M!"

This was too much. After everything that night, he didn't want to hear of any more successes. Alma's news was just another reminder of what he could feel slipping away from him, the loss almost palpable as an emptying sensation in his chest. He stepped backward, toward the yawning yellow doors of the bus.

"That's great, Alma," he said hollowly, and he registered the flicker of confusion and dawning hurt in her blue eyes, but felt no remorse. "Glad to hear you're living the dream."

He found a seat by himself and propped his knees against the sticky brown vinyl. He wore his camouflage hunting cap and pulled it low over brow, blocking out the lights shining over the top rows of the bleachers, and his girlfriend's shimmering presence below his window.

CHAPTER 7

Bright and early Saturday morning, Dex drove to the field house to watch the game tape from the Quincey game. Inside the field house the atmosphere was a divided one. The younger players, the ones who hadn't come so close to a title last year only to see it slip away at Semifinals, continued last night's elation with little whoops and slaps on each other's backs. The older players, however, were quieter than mourners in a funeral parlor. The bumps, scrapes, and bruises of the night before stood out against the seniors' faces, gone pale with nerves. There was a box of foil-wrapped breakfast burritos, but half of them went uneaten. The coaches set up their folding chairs in the back of the room so that they could watch the projector screen and the players at the same time. It had always made Dex feel like a deer being stalked through the trees, the coaches sitting there. He could never predict when one of them was going to rip you a new one from behind.

The coaches filed in and sat down, the legs of their folding chairs scraping against the linoleum. The boys took their seats as well. Also per usual, Maddox was the last one to enter the screening room. He kept the door to his office closed and the blinds in the window drawn, so all anyone could see was the shadow of his lumpy head balanced upon the great ox-yoke of his shoulders. He sat so still he might have actually turned to stone

The second the light in his office went out, one of the trainers flipped on the projector's lamp. Every Falcons game was taped with a suitcase-sized camcorder by one

of the assistant coaches in the press box. The projector itself was the latest technology money could buy, all courtesy of school bonds and the Quarterback Club: a Dukane Micromatic II, played both filmstrip and VHS.

Coach Maddox stepped into the room.

He'd shoved his hands into his pockets. The face of his big gold watch snagged on his khakis. He glanced over to the coach who held the Micromatic's remote and the game tape started rolling. The sophomore and junior players' cheery moods drained away. The only sound in the room for an hour was the whirr of the projector's fan. The coaches seemed to have time-stamped every mistake the boys had made, because every so often, without any indication from Maddox, the coach operating the remote would fast forward to another botched conversion, another broken tackle, another turnover.

Watching it all, the headache Dex had woken with that morning intensified, a slow-burning fire in his brain.

Maddox kept his eyes fixed on the screen. The players around Dex slunk lower and lower in their chairs. Then the tape ended. Everyone stared at the blank white square. Then, Coach Maddox went back into his office and shut the door.

If the situation weren't quite as serious, Dex might have found the whole thing funny. Maddox was a big fan of the good cop/bad cop routine. Any second now, he'd either emerge from his office tearful, saying he was real sorry he'd failed them that week, or he'd come out guns blazing, fists purple, a smorgasbord of colorful profanities unleashed like he'd been brainstorming them all week.

The door opened and Maddox came back into the room. He skimmed his flat brown eyes across every bent head, taking his time to note each one. Then he pointed at the blank screen.

"You boys might think you're something special this morning, getting past the Aggies. I'll admit, I wasn't sure y'all could pull it off, but you did." He inhaled deeply, held it, then expelled the air with a snort like a rhino. "But kind a performance won't get us past Eason, boys."

Maddox examined every atom of the room once more before speaking again, letting his words fuse with their very souls.

"I'm not gonna say anything else. Y'all just think about that this weekend. I'll see you on Monday." And he went back into his office and shut the door.

Someone flipped the lights on and the coaches rose from their seats, crossed their arms over their chests. Dex and the rest of the players sat broodingly in their chairs for a few seconds before getting up and filing wordlessly from the field house. They all knew what was coming for them on Monday—and the worst thing was, Coach Maddox knew they'd all imagine something more terrible than anything he could plan for them. So it wasn't like they would be getting any relaxation out of the next day and a half, anyway.

In the field house parking lot Harris, Kovar, and Rivet waved Dex over to Harris's covered-bed pickup.

"Listen, men," Rivet said, "just because we weren't perfect last night don't mean we got to mope around all weekend with our heads in the sand." He looked at each of

them to gauge the effectiveness of his logic. No one jumped up to pat him on the back by any means, but no one objected, either.

"Right," Rivet continued, apparently resolved to forge ahead anyway, "So, Gus Strickland's having a bonfire at his dad's deer lease tonight. Might be our last chance to blow off some steam before playoffs, you feel me?"

"Speak for yourself," Harris said glumly, "you and Kovar still have another year. Me and Dex, this is our last shot at this thing."

Rivet couldn't be deflated.

"I'm not gonna stop living my life chasing some ring that may or may not happen." He stalked off toward his car, a battered taupe Chevy Nova.

Kovar, a natural leader on the field but a crummy one in real life, muttered, "He's my ride," and shuffled after him.

Harris caught Dex's eye. "What you think, man?"

Dex took the measure of his surroundings. The sun bright on the bleachers, which cast blue shadows on the white gravel of the parking lot. There was a definite autumn crispness to the air, the smell of burning pine resin and that unmistakable odor of male sweat mixed with Old Spice. Smells that were to him inseparable from feelings of constant pressure and anxiety: deep football season. Years later, just a whiff of that scent would make his pulse race, would dampen his armpits.

He looked inside the Jeep and saw Reggie stretched out in the backseat, asleep, his Fergus Falcons baseball cap tipped over his eyes against the sun. Dex's younger brother could sleep anywhere: slouched against a wall, sitting at the dinner table. Even

crouched in a deer stand in hog-killing weather, Reggie could just close his eyes and catch Zs without losing his grip on his .30-06. But Reggie had not been where Dex was now. He was still sixteen and had not a care in the world. Dex was only eighteen months older, but at that moment he felt as wearied and world-worn as his father had looked the night Dex broke his hand.

"Let's just forget it all for a little while, buddy," he said, turning back to Harris. "We'll be do fine against the Rebels, you'll see."

Nore

Nore learned of the bonfire to celebrate the Falcons' first victory in the playoffs during the Saturday lunch shift at the Catfish King. Shawn Rivet, Beau Lewis, and Mike Berryhill came in around one, still puffy-eyed from having risen at eight to watch film that morning after the two-hour ride home following the game. They ordered two of the seafood sampler platters (catfish isn't seafood, technically, Nore always thought when someone ordered this) as well as a basket of hush puppies, a bucket of slaw, and an extra fillet of catfish apiece. As she carried the food on a blue tray to their table, a group of old men called her over to their booth.

"We'll take care of their meal, too," a man wearing suspenders over a Grand Lake O' the Cherokees fly-fishing competition t-shirt said, his voice cotton-soft. A Fergus High class ring, similar to the one Nore's father had worn, glinted on one knotted finger. She nodded and resumed her path to the boys' table. Folks secretly (and not-so-secretly) paying for football players' meals was a common occurrence in their town. There were rumors that some members of the Quarterback Club even insisted on maintaining a kind

of running tab, so that whenever current players came in to eat, their meal was to be recorded and later paid for when the member next came by the restaurant. The Catfish King was a franchise, so her manager, Woody, couldn't allow that. But Nore did not doubt that other establishments—Camille's Diner downtown the most likely—had agreed to this arrangement.

Nore placed the tray in front of the players and they demolished it efficiently, spines curled over their baskets, chewing contentedly with their mouths open and slurping their large cups of soda. Nore made her rounds to the other patrons. When she passed by the players again, they had leaned away from the table, elbows propped on the backs of their chairs. Shawn Rivet was making a tower with the emptied, grease-darkened paper boats.

"Gus Strickland's having a big bonfire on his dad's land tonight," Shawn said to Mike and Beau as he added another boat to the stack. "Kovar's going. Reckon you'll make it?"

Beau said his dad would skin him alive if he caught him sneaking out again, but Mike said he was game. Shawn gave him five him over the swaying paper tower. Nore felt the urge to roll her eyes, but the other customers might see and know she was listening.

"Seems a little soon to be kicking back our heels," Beau said, a scrape of irritation in his voice.

"Maybe for you," Shawn said lightly, "but as for me, my focus is still razor sharp, no matter what."

Woody called her to the condiment station to mop up some spilled ketchup, so she didn't hear the rest of the boys' conversation. When she came back by their table, Shawn held up a finger, an impatient summoning gesture that immediately put Nore on edge whenever a customer dealt it to her.

"Miss, we'd like the check," he said. He had a bit of a twinkle in his blue eyes, like he'd seen the booth of old men, probably knew them, and expected for her to smile and say the bill had already been taken care of.

Nore, who'd already taken the old men's money to the register and rung up both checks, paused, hand on her hip. Then, she went back to the counter and printed off a copy of the boy's bill, and brought it to their table.

"It'll be twenty-one eighty-five," she said.

When Nore got home at four-thirty, her mother's DeVille was not parked under the carport, and the house was empty. Her mother did not work on Saturdays, so Nore figured she was either at her friend Agnes Fletcher's house, at the beauty parlor, or at First Baptist helping out with the ladies' ministry, which put together hot meals to take to the invalid, home bound members of the church. Her mother was not in the habit of leaving notes to let her daughter know where she'd gone. Of the three most likely options, the last gave her a gloomy, sinking feeling. Ever since Mr. Palmer's rejection to have lunch with them, her mother'd been alternating between skipping church activities for a few days and then spending hours getting herself gussied up before showing up late,

dragging Nore out of bed or from whatever she happened to be doing at the time to be her wing woman. It was getting exhausting.

Nore made herself a snack of a mealy apple and potato chips and settled before the television. She'd gotten a few minutes into a *Love Boat* rerun when the phone rang. Nick was making plans to go to the bonfire, and had asked Patricia if she and Nore would like a ride. Nick knew everyone. As a roughneck, he worked seven twelve-hour shifts he called tours, pronounced "towers," and then spent seven days off. The weeks he was off, he either messed around with the engine of his LUV, or tore around Fergus with his buddies looking for trouble, and could be counted on to always know the details for the next bash.

Patricia wanted to go to the bonfire, but only if Nore would go with her. She was still hung up on Lonnie Rawlins, apparently, and anticipated him being there.

"If it's just me," Patricia said, "I'll be tempted to talk to him first. I have to let him make the first move." Nore considered Patricia's offer. She was tired from work, and she liked it when she had the house to herself, preferred it, actually, to her mother's needy company. And she didn't particularly relish a night of Patricia clinging to her arm while looking over her shoulder for some boy who clearly didn't give one red cent about her. On the other hand, there was just something *wrong* about staying in on a Saturday night when even your own mother had plans. And a little tickle of satisfaction nudged her below the ribs when she thought about her mother tramping in the door, anticipating her daughter asking her all about where she'd been that night, and winding up disappointed.

"Count me in," she told Patricia.

Nick drove them to Gus Strickland's deer lease. Nore experienced a flash of déjà vu as the truck gunned through the swinging gate and jounced over the cattle guard. A dirt drive wound through patches of trees and piles of cleared brush. The sun had just set, the sky that frighteningly deep purple blue of a cloudless dusk, like it was a bottomless lake you could fall into and never come up. Nick rolled the windows down and she could smell the bonfire before she saw its orange shimmer through the black tangle of trees.

Gus Strickland had graduated from Fergus high when Nore was in eighth grade, so she knew more of him that she actually knew him. Gus had played Defensive End for the Falcons, and she remembered how much everyone had considered him a hero five years ago. "Defensive End" had been more or less a cursory name for his position, because it seemed he did everything. Stepped in when the Quarterback was injured, kicked extra points, received for a few touchdowns. They'd thrown a big reception for him at the high school library, with cake and a reporter from the local paper present, when he signed his letter of intent to play for Sam Houston State.

He played one year in Huntsville. Then, like so many Fergus High graduates did, he quit school, moved back home, got a job with the road company, and seemed set adrift whenever she saw him out and about, like someone had gone in and surgically removed his sense of direction. His dad owned a deer lease just south of town, a couple hundred acres of trees and open fields with a hunting cabin. Gus became the guy with the hookup, the one who'd buy high schoolers kegs and dope and let them stumble around far enough out of town so the sheriff didn't get called. He was the guy who helped the cheerleaders put out the hay bales they spray painted with inspirational slogans outside the entrance to

Falcons Memorial Stadium. *Falcons Flying High to State! Ax the Aggies! All I Want for Christmas is a Falcons Ring!*

Nick parked the truck next to a herd of other trucks and they made their way toward the silhouettes of people walking back and forth in front of the fire. Down the hill, she could see the dim outline of the roof and chimney of the hunting cabin. The grass of the field was hard, almost stubble, so sharp it seemed like it might pierce the soft rubber soles of her Keds.

A keen wind swept down the field, stoking the fire and making her eyes water. She backhanded the tears, and her lashes, stiff with mascara, brushed roughly against her skin. Patricia had attacked Nore with her makeup caboodle, though she'd thankfully left her hair mostly alone, just curled the ends. She wore a white-and-gray plaid button down tucked into some of Patricia's acid-washed jeans, which felt a little small for her, and a belt with a faux turquoise-studded buckle.

Nick strode ahead of her and Patricia toward the keg, came back with a clear plastic cup of beer in one hand, the rims of two more pinched together in his other. Nore took her cup and considered the beer's yeasty odor, its sloshing pocked foam. The few parties she'd been to, Nore preferred to carry around her drink as a prop, nursing it so gradually that only half would be gone by the end of the night. She'd learned that it was easier that way, to just pretend to drink instead of refusing outright. She liked to feel secure in her body, in full control of the flexing of her hips and calves as she moved, able to come close to someone or run away if she felt like it.

But tonight—she had transformed. She wore clothes not her own, hadn't come here on her bike, and was at the mercy of when Nick wanted to leave, or of the generosity of someone else who'd driven to Gus Strickland's. She'd let herself be drawn into a kind of cage, one she'd chosen, but now had no graceful means by which to escape. She already floated over the sharp grass like she'd left her body, was watching its movements from far away. So she put the cup to her lips, and drank.

Dex

Dex held back at the edge of the fire, plastic cup in one hand half full with his second fill-up of Coors Light. A few feet ahead of him, Harris squatted near a bed of coals. A wire coat hanger sagged with the weight of four ballpark franks roasting in the heat. To his left, Gus Strickland and some other '79 Falcons had gotten out a kid's toy roping calf and were trying to lasso it, kept missing and busting out with toppling volleys of laughter that sounded canned, somehow, like it wasn't real. The beer had begun to insulate his senses. There was a numbing tingle in his limbs, a brother to the feeling he got when he was reading the field like a chess master, barely having to look for the ball because he knew it would be there. But this was not that sensation's twin, because in the middle of that prickling deadness, something like an iron kettle bell weighed down his insides, made it so that he felt too heavy to move even though the fire's radiation made him so hot he thought his eyebrows might burn off his face. He didn't know how Harris could stand it, kneeling so close.

"Harris," Dex said, forcing himself to step backward from the flames, "gonna go take a leak."

"You got it, bud," Harris said. He pulled the franks up off the coals and squeezed their unblistered middles, lowered them again.

Dex pitched the rest of his beer, which had gone warm, into the grass, and made for the keg. He didn't really have to urinate, but he did need something essential to do, an excuse to move away from the fire and the people celebrating around it that wasn't some weak, elusive reason he couldn't explain, not even to himself.

On the way there, he saw Nore Wilson. She was leaned up against one of the trestle tables Gus Strickland had set up just outside the bonfire's dome of light, their tops laden with cups, the keg, packages of hot dogs and marshmallows, wire hangers he hadn't bothered to unravel himself. She stood with her arms folded, listening to someone whose face Dex couldn't see, a guy only a couple inches taller than her with longish dark hair, broad shoulders, a pair of steel-toed workboots. As Dex drew closer, she glanced away from the man's face, caught his gaze, and then switched her attention back to the man.

If he'd been sober, Dex might not have interrupted them. But he wasn't. He drew nearer to them under the pretext of grabbing the keg's hose and pointing it into his cup. Then, he looked up and locked eyes with Nore again, acting as though he'd just now spotted her.

"Hey," he said. He couldn't think of what to say next, his brain limping to catch up to his cantering pulse.

"Hi, Dex," Nore said. The guy who'd been talking to her turned toward Dex, who was sure, now that he could see him properly, that he knew the man's name. He looked Dex up and down, plainly sizing him up, before extending his hand.

"Nick Lamar," he said. "Langley, right? Guess I owe you congrats?"

"Sure," Dex said. He took a larger swallow of beer than he'd meant to, slopping some down his chin. He wiped his shoulder across his face then reached across and shook Nick's hand. The guy had worker's hands: square, calloused, nicked with newish looking scars.

Lamar noticed the hand brace.

"Say," he said, pointing to the brace with his beer cup. "You're the one got his hand busted up at the McClellan game. I remember that, was the first game I didn't have overtime at the job site."

"Yeah. I, uh, just got the cast off yesterday."

Nick rocked back on the heels of his boots a little, a grin twitching up the corner of his mouth.

"Tell you what, I seen some rough shit on the floor. Saw a guy lose half his thumb when it got caught in the chain. 'Nother guy, this little Mexican, came this close," he tweezed an inch of air between thumb and forefinger, "to getting his head knocked off when a guy tossed some bags of mud mixer off the roof of the pump house." He pushed up the sleeve of his blue striped button-down and revealed a three-inch long scar that ran from elbow to the middle of his forearm.

"Got this when the driller had me check a blocked valve on the mud pump. Reached in there and discovered it was a roofing nail, of all things, sticking up like a spur. Took ten stitches to close me up."

Lamar didn't need to say it, Dex could hear him loud and clear: the guy didn't think too much of Dex's measly knuckle fracture.

Just as Nick Lamar reeled in to cast another tale, Nore stepped between them and squinted her eyes at the fire behind them.

"Think that's Patricia waving me over," she said. "See you later." Seeming to dismiss both guys at once, she moved off toward the crackling timbers.

Dex took the break in Lamar's momentum to make his escape, too. He grabbed a coat hanger, unwound it, speared a frank, and beat a path to the fireside. But when he got closer to the radius of its glow, he didn't see where Nore had gone. He knelt and roasted the hotdog, jacket and the knees of his jeans getting so hot next to the coals that he thought he'd burn himself if he touched the cloth.

He ate the frank and had another beer. Then two. The fire burned lower, low enough that guys started daring one another to leap across it. The girls hung back, their hands over their mouths in affected horror. But they clearly liked it, too—it was all to earn their admiration. Dex knew better. The spectacle was for the girls, yes, but it went deeper than that. It went to the core of their male existence, to that tipping point between fear and aggression that birthed violence in its purest animal form.

A few of the '79 Falcons started the competition. They took running leaps, amber tips of the flames kissing their boots before they staggered into the ground on the other

side. Then Shawn Rivet took a turn, did a tidy little tumble when he landed. Harris, taller than Dex, cleared the flames, too. He jogged over and punched Dex's shoulder.

"Your turn, brother!" he sang. "It's good luck, man. All of us make it over this, we're going to State for sure!"

They were all drunk enough to believe this to be true. Dex demurred, but after all the other current Falcons in attendance had made their leap over the coals, he couldn't delay it any longer.

He shuffled back to the spot from where the others had begun their takeoffs. Breathed deeply and felt his stomach, full of beer, gurgle. He ran, boots crunching the field's stubble. He could feel the fire's heat well before he reached it. Sweat rolled into the small of his back, and his arms shook. Just before he pushed off the ground, he caught a glimpse of Nore on the other side of the fire, and, for whatever reason, he faltered. Instead of landing in the dirt on the other side, his boot came down in a pocket of coals. Sunk down past the hem of his jeans. His other foot struck a log and he pitched forward, yanked his boot out of the coals and tripped out of the fire into the blessedly cool grass.

There was a beat of silence while Dex scrabbled on hands and knees to get away from the fire. He looked behind at his feet, fully expecting to see two flaming torches instead, but it had happened so quickly that all he'd done was singe the frayed hems of his jeans and smudge soot all over his boots. He'd caught his wrist on a burning log, though. The cold air stung against the burned flesh so badly that tears sprang to his eyes. Before he could blink them away, he met Shawn Rivet's gaze and watched the younger boy's expression morph from fear to a barely-masked smirk.

The boys let out a chorus of chuffing laughs, and one of the girls screamed, “Oh my God, are you okay?”

Gus Strickland loped over to him and helped him to his feet.

“Close call, man!” he said. “You sure you’re all right?”

“I think so,” Dex muttered. Worse than the wound on his wrist, shame seared through his body like a fever. Gus clapped ash off his shoulders in a patronizing sort of way, and Dex twitched out of his reach.

“Don’t touch me, man,” he growled.

Gus’s brows, a straight line on the severe shelf over his deep-set eyes, pushed together in a frown.

“Cool it, bro. You better get yourself down to the cabin and wash up, at least. Get some cold water on those feet,” he pointed down the hill at the outline of the hunting cabin’s A-frame roof.

“Yeah,” Dex said, chafing a hand across his face. He wanted everyone to stop looking at him, wanted them just to move on to some other focus of curiosity. He wasn’t their goddamn rodeo clown. He looked at the dark house at the edge of the field and moved toward it.

Gus had taped the flap of a twelve pack’s cardboard box to the cabin door, written BATHROOM SECOND DOOR ON RIGHT, STAY OUT OF LOFT! in black permanent marker. Dex limped into the cabin (he’d slightly twisted his ankle as he stumbled out of the fire), turned right at the second door, and felt along the wall for the light switch. A fluorescent bar shuddered to life, and by its graceless light Dex saw in the mirror that the

mess of soot and dirt was not limited to his jeans, but had grimed his hands and face, too. He turned off the light so he couldn't see himself. He could feel the dried-out cake of soap stuck to the lip of the sink. He pried it loose with his jack knife, turned on the hot water tap, and tried to work up a lather.

There was a faint rap on the door, and it creaked open. The light flickered on once more. Nore Wilson slipped out of the darkness of the hall and into the bathroom.

"That was really stupid," she said. The tone of her voice wasn't angry or accusing, but soft, affectionate, even. Like they were talking about a song they both loved.

Dex turned off the water.

"Guess so."

"Did you get burned?"

Other than the spot on his wrist, he wasn't sure. The shock of what he'd done was only now beginning to leach from his arms and legs, leaving his joints loose as straw. He wished she would leave. That Nore should see him in this moment was worse than anything, anyone else.

"Sit down." She pointed to the toilet.

"I don't need you to take care of me," he said.

Nore tucked her hair behind her ears, then grasped her hips.

"How come I can help you get that cast off your hand, but you won't let me see if you're hurt?"

"It's different," he said sullenly.

"Different," she echoed. "Because everyone saw you look dumb for a second?"

She glared at him. It had been too dark out in the field to properly see her appearance—he'd thought the deep shadows around her eyes and mouth were just another trick of the firelight—but now he saw that she'd put on makeup. The bluish light, unforgiving when he'd seen himself in it, picked up the silver points in her green-gray eyes, made her seem at once older and younger.

"You can't be perfect all the time, Dex," she said.

Dex looked away from her, down at the grubby tile. He sighed and rolled his eyes, feigning exasperation like he was just humoring her, but he sat.

She knelt at his feet, grabbed one boot and gently wiggled it off his foot. Removed the other. She peeled off one sock, and he prayed his foot didn't smell. He had no way of knowing. The scent of the fire was all over him, worked deep into his nose so he'd be smelling it for days. The top of her head was just inches from his face, and she, too, gave off the scent of burning, of things transmuting to ash.

The skin beneath his socks was redder than normal, but other than that looked unhurt. She clasped the exposed skin of his ankle. Arousal flooded up from her touch so quickly his scalp contracted painfully around the roots of his hair. Seated, his cock strained against his jeans. Don't look up, he prayed. Please don't look up. Please, please, look up.

Nore looked up. Her eyes paused at his groin, then kept traveling ceiling ward until they found his face. Her hand had not left his ankle, nor her eyes his eyes. Time

stretched out like taffy. As long as she kept holding onto his ankle, they would not have to face the fallout of this moment, to try to collect its shards and glue them back together.

She stood. Then she bent and pressed her mouth on his. He was too surprised at first to kiss her back, but then he was on his feet, too, reaching behind her shoulders to grasp her bottom and pull her closer. The result of this was that her forehead knocked against his, and she stepped away, rubbing at the spot gingerly. He could feel his face flushing hot again, the embarrassment making his hands seize up. He sat and started to put his shoes back on so he wouldn't have to look at her.

Nore

Nore watched him fumble with his boots. The pink weal of the burn on his wrist was starting to swell. She hadn't known she was going to kiss Dex the moment before it happened, but even after he bungled it, rushing in too fast, his enthusiasm and clumsiness plucked an emotion deeper and more resonant than the pity that had compelled her to follow him to the cabin. He jerked on one sock and shoved his foot into the boot, did the same with the other. She blocked his exit from the bathroom.

"You need to put something on that," she said. She pointed to the burn.

"It'll be fine," he said, but his voice was more tender now, relieved, too, like he was glad she'd chosen to pretend the moment before hadn't happened.

"Let's see if there's a first-aid kit?"

"Okay," Dex said.

They looked in the cabinet below the sink, but the only thing there was a plunger and some damp rolls of toilet paper and a few copies of *Penthouse*. She saw Dex's mouth go thin at the sight of all those bare breasts, and he slammed the door shut.

"We can check upstairs," he murmured.

"Yeah," Nore said. Her own voice sounded nervous, now. She followed him out of the bathroom. Dex's hand scraped along the wall as he felt for a light switch. A second later, the other was searching for hers, his fingers cool and rough. The bare bulb in the hall revealed a set of stairs leading up to a loft. They went up them.

In the loft, an old TV with rabbit ears sat on a dresser across from a bed spread with plaid flannel sheets, unmade, above which hung a framed print of ducks in flight over a pond ringed in bulrushes. There was also an old kerosene lamp, the kind you saw on the shelves at Cracker Barrel. The wick was burned at one end, and Nore found herself oddly charmed by the place, despite the odor of stale sweat, beer, and black rot. She imagined Gus and his father sitting by the light of that lamp, guns disassembled on their laps, cleaning the parts by its wavering glow.

"Don't see one up here," Dex said as he opened and closed the drawer of the bureau.

Nore found a box of matches under a copy of *Field & Stream*, struck one, and put it to the wick.

"Hey, look at that," Dex said, coming over to examine the lamp.

Nore sat on the bed, leaned her elbows on her knees as she watched the wick burn.

Dex sat next to her. After a moment, the only sound in the room was a lonely one, the wind whining through a crack in the window. Dex put his hand on her knee, and she turned to him as though they'd rehearsed this whole thing. He started to kiss her, and then eased her against the bed's one flat musty pillow. His fingers brushed the turquoise buckle of the belt she had borrowed, then retreated, like he wasn't sure this was okay. She pulled his hand up to the buttons of the shirt that wasn't hers. He winced as the pad of her thumb swept across the burn on his wrist, but he began to slip the buttons free. She kicked her panties off onto the floor as he removed his boots a second time, and as he moved over her, her eyes found a spot on the sloping plane of the A-frame ceiling, a smudge that looked like it could be barbecue sauce or ketchup or blood. As he pushed inside her, she closed her eyes and wondered how that mark might have gotten there.

CHAPTER 8

To celebrate the Falcons' advancement to the state quarter-finals, the city council organized a pep rally to take place on the first Saturday of December. That was the weekend that Fergus traditionally set aside for the Christmas parade and festival, so shoehorning a pause for the cheerleaders to recite some chants and for the band to play the fight song was as an easy feat. Local offices and artisans usually constructed booths around the square to promote their business, and so Nore, who would have avoided the parade like the plague if given the choice, found herself scribbling orders onto a guest check pad for the Catfish King.

The line cooks set up portable fryers and a griddle beneath an awning and sold catfish sandwiches and corndogs wrapped in foil, paper boats of hushpuppies and fries. They kept on selling food right through the pep rally, but Nore could hear the melodic cadence of the cheerleaders' cries from behind the barricade of spectators. Every so often, she would see the scarlet flash of a Santa suit or hear the shimmer of jingle bells kids wore around their necks. Little girls from Missy's School of Dance wandered around in black turtlenecks, sweatpants, and white glove

Gradually, the crowd lining the parade route broke up. The cooks started packing up the makeshift kitchen, and so Nore took the opportunity to sit on the curb behind the awning and smoke. She saw Dex Langley and a group of other football players walk by the plate glass windows of the bank.

For early December, the sky was unusually cloudless. The same deep turquoise as the stones women wore in thick silver bangles around their wrists, the light the golden light of autumn. Since he'd gotten the cast removed, Dex had resumed the easy, carefree stride with which the other players walked: like that special late-autumn light was for them alone. But Nore knew better. She knew that the swagger Dex carried with him in the school halls, all the free lunches and plates of home-baked cookies and men paying for his gas at the Falcon's Nest were all trappings, just part of the pageantry. In reality, Dex Langley was just as lonely and afraid as she was. It had been three weeks to the day since the bonfire at Gus Strickland's, that night in the hunting cabin. The only person who knew about the relationship between her and Dex, other than each other, was Dollie Buford.

Nore hadn't told Patricia because, well, Patricia wasn't the best at keeping secrets. Nore told Dollie on the last Saturday of November, two weeks after the bonfire, when Dex was out of town playing the Delaney Tigers for the Area championship. Up till then, she hadn't been sure she could keep it to herself, she experienced such wild swings between elation and fear that Dex would call it off at any moment. Dollie's second-oldest sister, Alice, had dropped her children at the Buford house so she could work her shift at the hospital. Dollie's mother was at her other sister Janie's house measuring her for a new dress, so Nore and Dollie were left in charge of four-year-old Ian, and eighteen-month-old Ellis.

Dollie turned on *Loony Toons* for the boys and she and Nore retreated to the kitchen. The stove was built into a half-wall that separated the kitchen from the den, so

they could talk with a clear view of the children and still have some privacy. Dollie poured a bowl of Funyuns. She and Nore munched for a few minutes before Dollie wiped her hands and mouth daintily on a paper napkin, and asked Nore why she kept disappearing so mysteriously, and so quickly, after school.

Nore gulped at her can of Diet Coke and let the soda burn a fizzy path down her throat before she answered. She knew she could trust Dollie, but she found it difficult to form words for whatever it was she and Dex shared. She feared that naming it, to give it a label, would cheapen it somehow, or turn it glass-fragile and corruptible.

So instead of trying to sum up her relationship with Dex in a single phrase or sentence, she described their routine:

Sundays, because Dex's folks were not the church-going sort, he was free to come over when Nore's mother left for church. She'd greet him at the door in her pajamas. He would always hesitate for a half-second before stepping into the house, rake a hand through his hair and look around like he expected someone to jump out from behind the couch with a camera. Then he'd come inside, they would have the sort of hurried, itch-scratching sex on the couch that, once relieved, allowed each to be themselves with one another. Then she'd turn on the television and they'd watch reruns of shows, the details of which she could never later recall. He'd stroke her back and recount to her every mistake he'd made in the game that past Friday or Saturday (not all playoff games could be played on Fridays). Sometimes he brooded and bellyached about these mistakes, but other times he was unaffected, as if he suddenly felt liberated by his flaws. She liked listening to him, following the meandering thread of his thoughts, how insecure he felt

about actions that, viewed from a distance, looked planned and purposeful. Then he'd get dressed and leave before Gertie came home.

Nore worked Monday nights, so the next time she saw Dex outside of school was on Tuesdays. She would ride her bike to the stadium, stow it behind a thicket of azalea bushes, and creep into the stands to watch him practice. Dex would take his time in the weight room until the parking lot had mostly cleared, and then they'd go off together in his Jeep, up to the hill with the water tower for half an hour before he had to drive his brother home. She had to work at the Catfish King again on Wednesdays, so Thursday their routine was the same as Tuesdays—brief, intense moments stolen at the highest point in Lovell County. If Dex had a Friday game, they met after her Saturday lunch shift. He'd pick her up from work, tie her bike to the back of the Jeep with some bungee cords, and they'd drive around the county back roads for a few hours. She got a free meal working at the Catfish King, so sometimes they shared a grease-spotted bag of hushpuppies, their fingers brushing as they reached in to retrieve a lumpy sphere of fried cornbread. Those tiny touches sometimes more intimate and stirring than their Sunday mornings on the couch.

Not every encounter between them involved sex. Sometimes they talked about kids at school they both knew, or television shows they liked, or hummed songs they knew on the radio together, not caring that neither one of them could carry a tune. Nore had never had a real boyfriend before. She did not know what to expect from Dex. The men Gertie had brought around after her father died always seemed to be wanting things from her mother, like free boxes of Carnation milk from the factory, or money for their

alleged business ventures, or advice about how to deal with their ex-wives/girlfriends. Other than her company, Dex asked nothing from her.

The one topic she and Dex did not discuss was Alma. Dex did not complain about her, or compare things Nore liked or did to his girlfriend's habits or opinions, and Nore did not ask about her. Her curiosity on this matter was growing, but she feared to bring it up. What she and Dex had seemed so simple, so natural, that she did not want to rock that boat until it was necessary. She was scared, though. If you were a couple with someone, folks were less likely to ask questions about what you might, or might not, be doing. She and Dex were not a roadmap she could navigate.

When Nore had finished recounting these things, Dollie leaned against the sink, silent for a few moments. She took a Funyun, nibbled it. Finally, she said, "Nore, are you *sure* he's going to be your boyfriend soon?" The brow her mother did not allow her to tweeze knitted as she said this, the concern so plain on her round face that Nore felt a spasm of unexpected, deep affection for her friend.

"Maybe," Nore admitted. "I don't know."

"But, you two aren't together for real."

"Maybe not. But it doesn't feel wrong."

Nore waited for Dollie to dredge up the old, tired arguments about purity and fornication that she, like Dollie, had been fed from the Sunday school lectern as preteens, the same rote phrases the school nurse recited to the girls in their unit on reproductive health in their freshman year Health Sciences class. Dollie still went to youth group at the Pentecostal church, and went to Bible camp for two weeks in the summers. Her mother

had tacked a framed needlepoint banner onto the wall in the front entry way that read, *As for me and my house we will serve the Lord*.

But Dollie said none of these things. Instead, this was what she told Nore:

"Just don't fall in love before he does. You'll get hurt that way."

So as Nore watched Dex and his friends walk through the booths downtown that first Saturday in December, she found herself searching her heart to see if she loved him or not. She took deep pulls on her cigarette, tipped her head back and blew the smoke toward the blue bowl of the sky. The leaves of the elm tree on the square scratched across the pavement. She could hear the tinny twang and snap of the wooden rubber band guns kids bought from a carpenter's booth. Dex, Harris, and Kovar turned at the edge of the square and made for the plume of violet smoke issuing from the spout of a black oil-drum slow cooker beneath the vinyl sign of Rick's Pit Barbecue.

Watching them stirred an emotion in her, but she did not know if she could call it love. Part of the problem was, she did not know for sure what it felt like to love. When she saw Dex across the square—him oblivious to her presence, walking in the assurance of the other boys' friendship, the adoration of the town almost visible around them like the motes of dust in a sunbeam—all Nore could articulate was a kind of longing, an ache to be near him and partake of that confidence. It was a sensation just shy of jealousy, two steps away from contempt, and sister to the thigh-wetting arousal she felt every time she heard his knock on her front door Sunday mornings.

She rose from the curb and ground her heel into the butt of her cigarette. Part of her wanted to see what would happen if she did not come to the door tomorrow morning.

The other half was counting the minutes, seconds, and breaths until the next day's sun pushed its yellow light through the curtains of her window.

Dex

Dex wanted and did not want Alma to find out about his relationship with Nore. He sometimes wished that football season would end already, that the Falcons would lose and he could have his weekends back so that he could spend them on that green couch, and yet also wished that football would never end, because he did not know what life would be like after he was no longer a player. The college scouts' offers had stopped coming; the letters taped to the fridge lost their crisp folds weeks ago.

He tried to be smart about the whole thing. He never talked to Nore in the halls or looked at her too long in the history class they shared. He was careful to be sweet and attentive to Alma after he'd hurt her at the Quincey game, but often found himself drifting into recent moments up by the water tower, and come back to earth to see Alma giving him a worried, probing look. She'd ask him often if he was nervous about the upcoming game, and he was beginning to grow impatient with her questions—with her concern in general—for it compounded the omnipresent lump of guilt in his chest, made it difficult to speak at times.

His performance on the field had improved little since he'd choked at the Quincey game. It was hard to turn off the voices in his mind, the battling desires. He couldn't read the field any more, just saw his teammate's bodies scrambling to and fro before his eyes, no logic to their movements. Coach Maddox pulled Dex into his office after one

particularly disastrous practice three days before they were to play the East Birnham Vikings in San Antonio.

"Son, I need to know what's eating you up," Maddox said. He propped his feet on his desk and took a piece of double bubble from a gallon bucket sitting on top of his filing cabinet. He popped the bubblegum in his mouth and threw another piece to Dex.

"Nothing, Coach." Dex untwisted the gum's waxy wrapper but did not put it in his mouth.

"Doc Kingston says your hand's healed up just fine. I know it can take a mental toll, worried you're not as strong as you once was."

"Maybe," Dex twitched his shoulders up and dropped them. He put the gum in his mouth and sugar coated his teeth, so sweet he wanted immediately to spit it out. He looked around the office to avoid meeting Maddox's eyes. The trash can in the corner was piled up with empty fast food wrappers and coffee-stained Styrofoam cups. The wall of filing cabinets and boxes stacked almost to the ceiling. Behind the desk was a dusty little shelf with a brass picture frame depicting the head coach with his wife and two daughters, little girls in the photo but who must be in college now, comparing the thinner, black-haired Maddox in the portrait to the heavier man with the almost-white ring around his bald patch.

"It ain't easy, but you got to get over it. Berryhill's he's a good boy, but I can't rely on him like I used to could you. The other boys, your friends, they need you to put whatever's messing with your head out of it."

Maddox took his feet off the desk and went to the window that looked from his office into the film watching room. The metal chairs from the past Saturday had not been put away, row after gray row of them lined up facing the projector screen, empty. The coach's voice took on a softer tone, almost paternal.

"If you tell me what's bothering you, I might could help you out. I seen this happen before, this close to a championship."

"I'm not sure what you want me to say, Coach."

The coach turned from the window.

"You got a girlfriend right? I seen you two after games. Dancer?"

Dex sat up a little in his chair. He frowned, nodded.

"I dated a nice girl like that in high school. I know I tell you boys not to get involved with girls during the season, it's a distraction. But Langley, sometimes you got to do what you got to do to get your focus back."

Dex wiped his hands on his jeans, the gum turned to chalk in his mouth.

"Coach?"

"Nice girls, they can be—what's the word? High-maintenance?"

"I don't know," Dex said. An image came to him—Nore's body stretched out beneath him on her couch, the three moles between her breasts and the one next to her belly button like Orion's belt and the tip of his hunting knife. "What are you trying to tell me?"

"Don't make me spell it out, boy. You just do what you got to do to clean out the pipes, clear your mind."

Maddox shooed him from the office. When he got outside, Dex leaned against the tin siding of the field house and pressed his face against the cold metal. The forecast for Saturday's game in San Antonio was warm, sixty-five degrees. But up in Fergus's corner of East Texas, the weather had taken a chill, frost stiffening the grass in the mornings. All the trees except the pines had dropped their leaves with little of the pageantry of other parts of the country. Just "brown and down," as old timers liked to say. He pulled his jacket tighter around him and went to his Jeep. It was a Tuesday. He drove back to the high school. Nore met him in the parking lot like she usually did, and they decided to go back to her house.

"You have to be gone by six, though. That's when my mom gets home," she warned.

They had sex in her bed this time, and afterward she poured each of them a bowl of Cap'n Crunch. They ate sitting on her bedroom floor since nothing was good on TV at this hour. Nore found a box of Cloves in her mother's panty drawer and lit one. Dex asked if he could try one, admitting he'd never smoked before.

"Really?" Nore asked, an amused lilt to her voice. She passed the cigarette to him.

"Yeah," Dex said, flushing a little. "I don't know—my pop always called it a wasteful habit." He puffed once and coughed. Nore pushed him her cereal bowl and he tipped some milk into his mouth.

"That's one more thing I can do, I guess, that you don't." Nore said with a little smirk.

“Guess so.” He pulled shakily on the Clove. “Still blows my mind you know all that about cars.”

“Yeah, well...” She bowed in her shoulders and gazed at the diamond of nubby carpet between them.

He should have known better than to mention anything having to do with her father. She always got quiet after that, faded away from him into herself. He’d learned the only way to draw her out after that was to knock himself down a peg or two.

“Hey,” he said. He laid his palm across her bare thigh. “You want to know something else?”

“What?”

“I don’t like football all that much.”

Nore’s eyebrows lifted and she tilted her chin skeptically.

“True story. I want to go to med school, be a surgeon.”

“Get out of town.”

“Really,” he continued. He told her how the realization had come to him the past spring, when he’d dissected a cat for his Anatomy & Physiology class. The other players who shared the class with him practiced ventriloquism on the cats’ jaws, making the poor limp creatures their puppets for dick jokes. They shoved paper clips into the cats’ withered anuses, miming enemas when the teacher’s back was turned. But Dex—he spent the entire two weeks gently shaving hair and skin away with the scalpel to reveal the grape-like clusters of lymph nodes. He lifted out the heart and examined its chambers. He’d been at once delighted and deeply saddened to discover five tiny fetuses in the

uterus, small as kidney beans in the pod-shaped bifurcated womb. He wanted to learn how it all worked, how someone put all those parts back together and gave them life again.

No one, not Alma or Reggie, or his parents or his best friend Harris, who knew almost everything Dex knew, was aware that he wanted a life other than the time-patented Fergus model. His mother was the daughter of farmers, had quit her job at a department store after marrying Dex's father. His father worked for the forest service. He hadn't gone to college. He drove a cherry picker truck around the county dismantling downed limbs and checking trees for blight, spraying herbicide on invasive ferns, advising little old ladies on which trees wouldn't crowd out their rose gardens.

The career his parents had in mind for him was this: he was to get an athletic scholarship to a Division II school, I if he was lucky. He was to earn a modest degree in four years if he didn't party too hard. He was to come back to Fergus, marry a nice girl like Alma, and have a family. He couldn't see how he could ask his father to pay for a medical degree—that was eight years of school. And now, what if the scholarship fell through? After the season finished this fall, he might be well on the path to becoming just like those old timers who sat behind the goal posts slipping rye into their Dickie's cups.

Nore listened to all of this without moving, not even to pull on the Clove slowly burning down to the filter in her hand. She barely blinked. Dex finished, and diverted his gaze to the knob of her closet door, where one of her bras—white, with a deckle of lace along the cups—looped around the handle.

When he looked back, Nore was removing the t-shirt she hadn't taken off when they were making love. She palmed the skin beneath her left breast, where one of the four moles on her abdomen dotted her flesh like a drip of paint.

"What do you think? Does it look like a cancer?" she said. He could tell she was messing with him, but she was taking him seriously, too—being silly so he wouldn't feel foolish.

"Surgeons don't learn that kind of thing," he said. He could feel himself getting hard again.

"What use are you to me, then?" she said as he pulled her toward him. He started to peel off her underwear.

"Hey." She stopped him. "When are you going to break up with Alma? I'm not going to keep doing this, you know. Be your piece on the side."

Dex sat back. Those words, *piece on the side*. They stung like she'd tossed sand in his face. Nore crossed her arms over her chest. He knew he couldn't keep putting her off about this. And he wanted to do the right thing. Being with Nore made him feel at once deeply satisfied and also like the most terrible guy in town. But he also knew he also couldn't handle any more upsets in his life right now; his team depended on him to get his head back in the game.

"Soon, Nore," he said. "Just as soon as things settle down."

She nodded, but didn't seem interested in sleeping with him a second time. She picked up the bowls with the dregs of their cereal and stepped around him to get to the door.

“Mom will be home soon,” she said. “Maybe you should head out.”

CHAPTER 9

The next day, Wednesday, Alma asked him to come over to her house after practice. She said she wanted to spend some time with him before the team left Friday afternoon to make the drive to San Antonio.

Alma lived with her parents in a subdivision south of the city limits, out toward Gus Strickland's but not as far. The neighborhood, Woodlawn Lakes, was flush with the expected tribe of doctors and lawyers, as well as the engineers and executives who ran the oil companies. Alma's father was an administrator at St. Cosmas's, her mother a realtor. The HOA did not like cars parked on the street, or more than one or two in the driveways, so Alma's father always asked Dex to move his Jeep into the garage when he came over. It never failed to perturb him, doing this. He felt caged. Coming or going, his actions were monitored, recorded, and judged.

Alma opened the garage door when he drove up—they had an electric door opener—and he noticed that her parents' cars were absent. Alma led him into the house after he took his boots off in the mud room. The house smelled like gingerbread and cinnamon, of orange oil on the wood floors and something acrid, bleach, maybe. A ten-foot natural Christmas tree twinkled on and off in the family room. A stranger would have said a perfect, happy family lived here.

Alma's books and papers whited out the kitchen tabletop in neat snacks. Oh yeah, exams were next week. His girlfriend filled a plate with tea cookies and apple slices for him and placed it on the vast granite island. He wasn't hungry, but he took three cookies and stuffed the first into his mouth. He wasn't sure what he and Alma were going to talk about. That's all she ever wanted to do, talk.

"I guess Coach has got you guys working hard," she said cheerfully.

Dex swallowed the first cookie, nodded.

"We're almost done learning the new moves for the game. Miss Nancy wants us to start working on the Christmas routine, but the officers think it's bad luck, seeing as how State's still two weeks out. Don't want to count our chickens before they hatch, I guess."

Dex choked down two more cookies, then wiped his mouth on his sleeve.

"Alma," he said, "I don't want to talk about the game."

She tugged the strings of her white hooded sweater and smiled apologetically.

"Sorry. I guess I'm nervous for y'all. I know how important this is to you."

"I don't need another person worried about me."

She took a step back from the island and laced her arms in front of her.

"What do you want to do, then?"

"Let's just watch TV or something."

"Okay, then." She went into the living room. Dex settled on the couch and she joined him, curling herself beneath his arm. They watched a few minutes of the *Rudolph* Rankin-Bass Christmas special. Rudolph and the Abominable Snowman had reached the

Island of Misfit Toys. The toys outlined their defects to Rudolph: a cowboy riding an ostrich, a train with square wheels, an airplane unable to fly, a boat that sank instead of floated.

The program flipped to commercial, a local ad for a pest exterminator that featured a midget dressed in a cockroach costume, multiplied by special effects into twenty identical dancing roaches inside an animated fridge. A car's headlights shone through the living room window, panning across the wall like a searchlight before disappearing—a bank manager, perhaps, on his way home from work.

"Alma, where are your parents?" Dex asked, abruptly aware of how empty and cold the house seemed.

"Mom's got a showing, Dad had a meeting," Alma said. She looked up at him with a calculating glimmer in her blue eyes. She got up, turned down the volume on the TV, and came back to the couch. Dex knew what she wanted. They started to kiss, the same innocently erotic twist of her hips in his hands, her breasts pressed against his chest. He ran his thumbs along the waistband of her jeans but knew she'd push away if they dipped lower. He thought of Nore. A board creaked in the house. He lifted Alma off of him.

"Your parents will be home soon. They'll see my Jeep in the garage."

She looked down at him.

"You don't want to do this?"

"I know it's not going anywhere." It was cruel to say so. He hated himself saying it, and yet it felt good, too, to see her cheeks pale.

"You know how I feel," she said. She rose and held out her hands, palms up.

"I know I can't deal with distractions right now," he drew a breath. He'd been dreading this conversation, her reaction and whether he'd be forced to admit the things he'd done with Nore. He'd meant to do this until after the season, but now he confirmed how frustrated he was, angry, even, at Alma's continual blue-balling him.

He stood and took Alma's forearms in his hands.

"Coach talked to me today. He reckons I ought to...ought to take a break. You know, clear my head."

Alma backed out of his grip.

"You mean, take a break from me?"

He cast his eyes down to the rug. It was one of those Persian ones, red with twisting vines and leaves and mazes. Staring at it too long, you could make yourself dizzy. This was the moment. He would tell Alma about Nore, he'd do the right thing, break things off with his girlfriend before he really hurt her later. He inhaled but the breath caught in his lungs, his throat closed off. He was going to do this. He was going to do this.

"No, I don't mean that," he murmured. "I just mean—God. I don't know what I mean."

Dex scratched at his jaw, where he'd missed a patch of beard shaving this morning. He accidentally nicked a bump and felt blood leak under his fingernail. Alma studied him, angry tears sparkled at the corners of her lashes. He spun through a Rolodex of excuses in his brain, and finally landed on one that sounded halfway believable.

"It's this college thing, Alma. I'm not a genius like you, I can't just get into any school I want. I guess I'm just real shook up about it."

"What does that have to do with me? I've done nothing but try and help you." Alma wiped at her eyelids, streaking black across the top of one cheekbone like a scorch mark.

The DeKalbs had one of those Olan-Mills family portraits over the mantel. In it, all the members of the family wore white shirts in front of a white background, with Alma, her older brother Andrew, and their father standing around a white rocking chair in which their mother sat. Looking at it, you wouldn't guess that the smiling man in that photo now slept on the couch in his office, or that Andrew never came home from college anymore. Dex used to catch Alma gazing up at that portrait, her shoulders under his arm gone stiff as an oar. He used to think, *I'll be better for her. I won't do that to her.* And here he was, hurting her.

"You're right. I'm sorry. God, I'm stupid. Please, just forget I said anything," Dex said. He rubbed both palms across his eyes, like his father always did after a long day spent inside filing paperwork. His father, his family, were woodsmen. They hated being indoors.

Dex got to his feet and drew her to him, folding her in his arms. Her back muscles petrified, resisting him. But then she relaxed into the embrace.

They watched until the end of *Rudolph*, and then Dex said he'd better scoot before her parents came home. He shoved his boots on in the mud room and pressed the button in the garage to lift the door. It rose, creaking and squealing on its aluminum

tracks, a sound his father would have likened to “a stuck pig.” He imagined Alma having to put the door down after he left, her listening to those dying noises. The roots of his hair felt hot. He drove through the housing development back toward Route 87, each house nearly identical with its Austin chalk porticoes and eaves limned in Christmas lights (white, the only color the HOA would allow, according to Alma). It was a little like being lost in a maze.

Nore

That Saturday, Nore listened to the East Birnham game on the radio while she refilled all the ketchup bottles for the tables. Joey, the cashier, and her manager Woody had the radio turned up loud enough for anyone in the restaurant to follow the game. Normally, she didn’t give two shakes about football, but as she balanced the red plastic bottles on top of one another, she found herself being drawn into the commentator’s tinny voice, ears pricked for any mention of number fourteen, Langley. There was a lot of Clark Kovar, predictably, and Harris Johnson and Beau Lewis and Mike Berryhill. But she only heard Dex’s name mentioned once, early in the game.

A group of roughnecks came in around four. Judging from the cleanliness of their boots, this was a pre-shift meal. Nick Lamar was with them. They sat close to the radio so they could listen to the game. Nore took their orders. Nick tried to derail her professionalism at every turn, asking her to re-name the side options for every basket like it was an in-joke between them. She nearly threw down her guest check the fourth time she had to repeat, “You get a choice of slaw, potato wedges, mashed potatoes, baked beans, green beans, hushpuppies, or fries.”

So at the half: 27-19, Vikings. I tell you what, these Falcons have a lot of weapons, but they have to coordinate. Coach Maddox has spent years building up his defense, but that can't be everything. These kids got heart but if they can't generate offense they're not going nowhere.

Woody, who was leaning on the front counter with his head close to the radio, whistled and said, "I don't know if these boys have it in 'em this year."

"Maybe it'll put them in their place for once," Nore said irritably as she came up to send the order back to the line cooks.

"Vinegar and honey, Nore," Woody said, shorthand for one of the many platitudes he liked to spout at his employees. Nore wasn't sure if he said these things out of a truly fatherly impulse or just a patronizing one, though she suspected the latter. A bad attitude at work earned: "You catch more flies with honey than vinegar." Complaining about a lack of tips: "Don't blame the cow when the milk goes sour." Asking Woody for a raise? "If wishes were horses beggars would ride." Sometimes Nore wanted to repeat one of his sayings back to him—often she had the perfect opportunity—but she wanted to buy that Impala from the used car lot, so she'd clench her teeth and grin through his finger-wagging.

Nore brought Nick and his work buddies their food (informing Nick twice that the dessert options were chocolate pudding, banana pudding, or pecan pie) and wiped down the newly-filled ketchup bottles before distributing them to the tables. On the radio, the Falcons and Vikings game resumed play. *Possession reverts to Vikings...touchdown...Falcons first down...Rivet kicks for extra point, it's good...*For the

next quarter hour it was just back-and-forth, tit-for-tat plays between Fergus and East Birnham. Then, halfway through the third quarter, the Vikings made an adjustment and the mood in the Catfish King darkened.

"They're just steamrolling our boys," Joey moaned.

Nick and the other roughnecks had left for work at this point. Nore pocketed their ten-dollar tip and cleared the crumpled napkins and cups and emptied baskets from the table. A few minutes later, it was all over. Final score: 36-26, Vikings.

Nore had worked a double shift that day, so she didn't head for home until after ten p.m. Her calves and thighs and back ached as she made the final turn onto Sycamore. At first, she didn't think anything of it when she opened the door from the carport to the utility room and noticed the odd silence in the house. Usually, when Nore came in from work, her mother had the television switched on, its babble filling the house with canned laughter and men reciting the same news stories over and over. Tonight, only the refrigerator hummed.

On the table a pair of Bibles lay open next to plates smeared with the leavings of a frozen lasagna and congealed butter beans. Nore peered into the living room but saw no one. She took the plates from the table and threw them into the sink on top of the breakfast dishes, turned the faucet on as hot and loud as the water would go, lathered up the sponge and started scrubbing. After a minute or two, her mother shuffled into the kitchen wearing her slippers and blue robe belted tight around her, a triangle of bare skin dipping below her collarbone.

"I didn't hear you come home, hon," her mother said.

A fleck of oatmeal refused to lift off the bowl as Nore washed it, not even after holding it under the scalding water, scraping at it with her thumbnail.

"Did you have a good day at work?" her mother pressed.

"No."

"No tips?"

"I got tips."

"What's the matter, hon?" Gertie said. She hugged her arms to her shoulders in the blue robe, the robe Nore's father had gotten her so many Christmases ago.

Nore crossed from the sink to the table, pushing past Gertie to retrieve the two water glasses.

"Is he still here?" Nore asked.

"Who, Mr. Palmer?" Gertie's neck pinkened just like Nore's did when she was flustered. "No hon, he and Agnes left hours ago," she murmured, picking up the Bible. "Must have forgotten."

Nore dropped the glasses in the sink and strode back through the utility room, realizing she'd forgotten to chain up her bike. It was only then, as she opened the door to the carport, that she noticed the gaping door to the shed. The security light in the backyard touched nothing inside it, the darkness complete and empty. She felt for the key on its chain, but of course there would be more than one key to the lock, the one Nore had found in a drawer all those years ago just a copy.

"Where's daddy's tools?"

Gertie called from the kitchen, having taken up the sponge and a dirty bowl. "Those old things? The church is having a yard sale so the kids can to go to Mexico. They're working at an orphanage for a week. I took the tools up there this afternoon."

Nore was too angry to cry. The door clapped shut after her as she went to unchain her bike. She launched out of the drive so quickly that gravel sprayed up behind her. She found herself longing for Dex, for his touch on her back—but he was on a bus right now, on the way back from defeat in south Texas. Then she was angry again, for her weakness in wanting him. Where was she going to go? She still wore her blue and yellow polo shirt from work under her jean jacket.

As she turned left at the cemetery at the end of Sycamore, the solution came to her: Dollie's house.

Dollie lived on the east side of town. Not as far east as the country club and the wooded estates built with the money from Fergus's first boom, but in a nicer neighborhood than Nore's. The houses here were not new, but they had garages and back patios and fireplaces. The blinds of Dollie's window peeled up after Nore rapped it with her knuckles a few times, revealing her friend's pillow-creased face. Dollie rubbed sleep from her eyes, then pushed up the window. Nore asked if she could spend the night. Dollie said she could, then went and unlocked the front door to let her in. Nore followed her through the dark house back to her room, where she closed the door and switched on the bedside lamp.

In the lamp's glow, Dollie took in Nore's Catfish King uniform.

"You worked this late?" Dollie asked, glancing to the bedside clock, which read a quarter past eleven. Dollie's family went to bed early.

"Mom and I had a fight," Nore said by way of explanation.

Dollie's eyebrows creased in sympathy. Back when Nore's father had just died, and her mother sat around for days in front of the television, dirty plates piling up by the couch and stubbed-out cigarettes in the ashtray, Nore had asked to sleep over at Dollie's so often that Dollie's mother started calling Nore her fifth daughter.

She pinched the fabric of the polo. "Mind if I borrow some clothes?" she asked.

Dollie pulled some sweats and a medium Pine Cove Bible Camp t-shirt from her drawer and gave them to her. Nore went across the hall to the bathroom, showered as quietly as she could, cinched the ties of the sweatpants as tight as they would go, and came back to Dollie's room with her hair turbaned in a towel. Dollie had once shared a room with her older sister, Celine, and the sister's twin bed, pushed against the opposite wall from Dollie's, was usually covered in stuffed animals. While Nore was in the bathroom Dollie had moved all the animals and turned down the bed for her, was now back in her own with the quilt pulled up to her plump chin.

"Thanks," Nore said. Sleep crashed over her and she had barely crawled beneath the blankets before it took her, pinned her down with its weight.

CHAPTER 10

Nore

She stayed with Dollie for a week. Her mother figured out where she was and called the Bufords on the second day, alternating between weeping and rage, begging to know what she'd done wrong and demanding that Nore stop acting like a two-year-old and come home already. Dollie's parents, thankfully, told Nore she could stay until she felt calm enough to go home.

Mr. Buford worked as a manager at the Super 1 and had a twenty-percent discount on already discounted groceries, so there was always fresh, made-from-scratch food stocking the kitchen and walk-in pantry. Mrs. Buford fixed a breakfast every now and then with something she called "chocolate gravy." Nore had watched her stand at the stove and stir together a mixture of butter, cocoa, sugar, milk, and flour in a saucepan that the Bufords poured over buttered toast or biscuits. It was a meal that Nore's mother might not have turned her nose up at making herself, but would have watched Mrs. Buford do so with a smug curl to her lip, simply because Mrs. Buford's thighs wobbled when she walked.

But the comfort of the Bufords' home did little to ease the anger that scratched at Nore's skin whenever she thought of the tool shed's gaping maw, when she remembered that she would never again hold her father's wrenches and vise grips, palm their reassuring cold hardness as she worked the magic he'd given her on a broken car.

By Monday morning, she was jumpy as a tadpole, eager to see Dex. Now that the Falcons were out of the playoffs, she knew Dex wouldn't have after school practice. She smoked behind the Ag barn during sixth period, waiting for him to come out to his Jeep. Other football players emerged before him, shoulders of their letterman jackets slumped, the paths they took to their trucks not direct but wandering, the bleary look of people walking out of an afternoon movie in July. At last there was Dex. He came out sliding a hunting cap onto his hair, the green lanyard with his keys swinging off his arm like a clock pendulum.

They drove up to the water tower. There was a gate before you got to the top with a sign reading CITY OF FERGUS PUBLIC WORKS KEEP OUT, and a length of chain with a Masterlock looping it closed. Whoever had bought the lock had forgotten to peel the its combination off the back, so it was easy enough to get through. Nore liked the spot for its privacy, but also because the view had a way of stilling her, of reminding her how small Fergus was against its backdrop of green pines and jutting oil derricks, the main drag with its false fronts like uneven teeth. They could even see the highway from here, the flash of an oil tanker's aluminum hull like the scales of a rainbow trout.

Her father liked to fish in the little creek behind his garage. He cooked the sunfish and crappie he pulled up on a hotplate in his office for lunch those Saturdays she went to work with him. Nore remembered the muddy, metallic taste of those fish. She could barely choke it down, but she ate because it made her father happy.

Nore peeled off her jeans and sat on Dex's lap. It was graceless and awkward, the only way they could make it work in the Jeep. He lifted her up, she bore down.. He came

quickly and pressed his nose into her t-shirt. She would remember that for years, him still inside her, his eyelids hot against her breastbone. They pulled their pants back on and he told her about the loss, about what it was like to walk into the locker room to see players still in their pads and cleats, bent double with emotion. They'd become boys once more in the face of failing their town, their coaches, one another. On the long ride home through the dark, no one had slept or looked at each other's faces. How could you look at one another, when you'd both been so recently crippled by such an embarrassing, pointless kind of grief?

She listened to it all. And as she listened, she panned her gaze across the town. It was almost winter, the longest night of the year little more than a week away. Below them, people were switching on the Christmas lights on their houses, propping up wooden cut outs of wise men and baby Jesuses in mangers, running extension cords to mechanical deer dipping their heads toward yellow grass. Down Main street, the flower shop would have up its window display of poinsettias, the hardware store would arrange fake snow around vintage trains and miniature cars. Couples would walk down the street, mar the glass with their overlapping fingerprints.

"Dex," she said when he'd finished speaking, "this is the last time I'm coming up here with you like this, not while you're still with your girlfriend."

She hadn't realized that she was going to tell him this until she did. But after she said it, she knew she meant it, that even though she was afraid to drive him away, after what she'd been through with her mother that weekend, she needed to know.

He'd been skating his hand back and forth across her back, the lightness of his fingers strumming through her body like a plucked harp string. But at her question, he stopped.

"Why do you want to mess up what we have?"

She pushed herself away from him. She'd expected this, but also somehow believed that in anticipating such a response, it might not happen.

"You don't want people to know we're together."

Dex reached for her hand but she scooted out of his reach and clapped her palms between her thighs.

"I don't want to hurt Alma."

"You've already screwed her over."

He flinched and turned his face to the window.

"I can't do that to her," he said.

The electric charge she'd felt licking along her veins just minutes before dwindled and died. The wind that so often nudged the Jeep's frame up here on the hill, the wind that now whistled along the cracks in the doors, echoed in a hollow space deep inside her. She pulled her puffed nylon jacket on over her t-shirt and put her hand on the latch of the passenger door.

"Fuck this," she muttered.

Dex reached across and stopped her from tugging the handle.

"Don't leave. I'll drive you home."

He didn't even know she was staying at the Buford's. She had not told him about her fight with her mother. All he ever did was talk about himself, and up until a second ago, she'd liked it. His life was an escape from her own. But at this moment, Nore realized she'd been waiting, biding her time for him to figure out that confession was a two-way street. She could not wait anymore.

She ducked under his arm and shoved open the door. Ran down the hill and through the gate they'd left unlocked. She heard the whine of the Jeep's engine behind her, and cut through a thicket of brambles and saplings to reach the base quicker. A thorn slashed a long red stripe down her right forearm, and she put the scratch to her mouth to lick up the blood that beaded there, its coppery tang like that of the bottom-feeder fish her father once cooked for her. Tears prickled her eyes but she blinked them away. She'd have to cross the road to keep going, and she could hear the Jeep getting closer.

There was hollow with a creek shaded by ferns and skeletal blackberry bushes. Nore crouched next to the still, tea-colored water, gazing at her dim doppelganger on its skin. Dex's boots crunched the gravel on the road's shoulder above her. He called her name for twenty minutes. She'd broken a sweat as she ran, and it soon lifted off her, carrying away the heat that had cocooned her in the Jeep. She began to shiver. Night draped a green cloak over the hollow. The door slammed and the engine's drone died away. She climbed up out of the creek bed and started walking along the road, knowing she could always find where she wanted to go so long as she followed it.

Nore avoided Dex at school. It seemed she was avoiding everyone now. It had been two weeks since she spoke to her mother. Dex left notes in her locker, tucked one into the handlebars of her bicycle, even attempted to follow her after their history class to get a word in during the five-minute passing period. He called her house once, and she picked up the line without speaking. Dex said "Hello? Nore?" and she listened to the scratch of his breath across the receiver, like when you put a conch to your ear and were supposed to hear the ocean, even though Nore had never seen or heard a real ocean. She hung up.

But in none of his notes or attempts to talk to her did he mention their relationship or even use the pronoun "we." It was all "I" and "me" and "you." As her father might have said, Dex had tried the car and wanted to keep leasing it, but not commit to buy. If Nore had not been the type of person who stored up injustices like treasures for a time capsule, she would not have ignored him so completely. Her keen memory for wrongs done her was like a cat's. Once abused, never forgotten. After two weeks, his efforts to talk to her dried up.

At night, she lay in Dollie's twin bed with the ruffled bedspread pulled up to her chin, the glassy eyes of the stuffed animals picking up points of light from the streetlamps outside. She listened to Dollie's light snoring, unable to sleep as moments on the couch, on the hill overlooking town, and sharing bags of greasy fast food with Dex came back to her. Nore, who had always existed with her eyes pointed no more than one step ahead of her, her decision-making sensibilities rooted either firmly in the present, or in nourishing the weed of past slights done her, experienced a brief moment of foresight: however the

course of her life spooled out from this time on, she knew she would always return to those moments. They would become preserved inside a fishbowl of memory, untouchable, an axis upon which the rest of her life would turn.

Final exams ended the Monday before the State championship game, which fell on Christmas Eve. She'd debated whether to even show up for the exams—it wasn't like she'd been studying much the past few weeks—but in the end she gave them a shot. While at school, Nore overheard some of the football players hatch plans to carpool to the championship at Texas Stadium in Dallas. She found it difficult to believe that just a few weeks ago she'd practically had her ear to the radio, pulse hammering in tandem with the commentator's frantic reporting.

Nore spent Christmas with the Bufords. All of Dollie's sisters came over with their husbands and children for Christmas lunch. Dollie and Nore were assigned to watch the kids while Mrs. Buford and the three older sisters unwrapped and warmed what seemed like twenty baking dishes. The kids were all of the sticky, clingy stripe, demanding constant entertainment. Dollie, as their aunt, was patient, but Nore was overwhelmed by their neediness, even vaguely disgusted by how their parents had indulged their every want. The children squabbled over and broke presents they'd ripped open only that morning, or complained that Santa Claus hadn't brought them this or that treasure from their wish list. After the sisters had carted their children back home that evening, Nore decided to take a break from Dollie's house. She rode her bike up to the mobile home park at Bishop's Hill to spend the night with Patricia.

Patricia made popcorn and promised Nore they would watch something non-Christmas related on the VCR. But then Nick came home with a box and commandeered the television. He'd bought himself an Atari with a bonus he'd received for working overtime on his last rig tour.

"My brother might work like a man, but he sure plays like a thirteen-year-old," Patricia said with her usual affected cynicism, after arguing with Nick about the television. She and Nore instead retreated to her bedroom to listen to some old Monkees LPs, music they remembered their babysitters liking when they were little. Patricia snuck a bottle of cheap vodka from her dad's stash under the kitchen sink and they mixed it with water and sour lemon concentrate from the fridge.

"Dad'll just think Nick's friends drank it all," Patricia said as she stirred the mixture with a long-handled spoon. She explained that her father was out overseeing a rig installation over a new drill site. "We're not much of a holiday family," she added.

Nore and her mother had never been much for the holidays themselves after her father died, but her memories of their Christmases together before that were warm, happy ones. She suspected now that her father had overspent every year, considering that when her mother sold his business after he died, Gertie had moaned for weeks that she'd made little off the sale after paying off the loans stacked against it. She remembered the bottles of perfume and pearl earrings her father had bought for her mother, the dolls he would buy for Nore just to appease her mother, but later sneaking into her room with things like fishing poles, a miniature tool set, the Schwinn he'd given her the Christmas before he died.

Looking at Patricia's face when she said that, *We're not much of a holiday family*, Nore thought she saw the residue of those family gatherings when her parents had still been married but probably fighting, pulling their children into their arguments as ammunition. The fact that Patricia's mother had called earlier that day to tell her she and her new boyfriend, a pilot, would be spending the holiday in Las Vegas thanks to an unforeseen but welcomed flight delay. It hung in the air around Patricia as tatters of something she tried to brush off of her like lint, but lingered beneath her put-upon indifference.

Nore sipped at her drink, but Patricia knocked it back like water.

Her friend slipped into a doze around midnight, and Nore was feeling pretty drowsy herself. But she also had to pee, so she roused herself from the nest of blankets she and Patricia had made on the floor of Patricia's room and stepped into the hall. From the living room, the electronic blips and burps of Nick's Atari game nipped at her ears. After she used the bathroom, she slunk into the living room watch the colored dots on the sixty-inch screen zig and pop with starry explosions.

Nick paused the game when he became aware she was watching.

"It's got two joysticks. You know you want to play," Nick said.

"Do I?" Nore mumbled. The vodka and lemon concentrate had numbed her lips. She folded her legs Indian-style on the floor by the Atari. Nick put one of the joysticks into her hand and inserted a different cartridge into the console.

"It's real easy. This one's called *Swordquest*. We'll go through these rooms, all of 'em named after horoscope names, and pick up clues."

Nore watched the tiny running man on the screen drop through different colored squares, the screen changing between images of the running man and pulsing rainbow-hued bars. Even though he explained the goal she couldn't make sense of things, all the moving colors and boxy images lulling, more than anything.

"Let's just play *Street Racer*, then," Nick said when he noticed her flagging interest. Now, this was a game she could understand. You just moved the joystick to guide your car along the track. Nore felt her body disappear under her, drawn up and into the two-dimensional yet oddly deep landscape, feeling as though she might scrape her head along the flat, soap-blue sky. Then, she crashed the virtual race car and sagged, flung back to earth.

"Hey, you were doing real good," Nick said. He nudged her shoulder gently. "Let's go again."

She took up the joystick again. The game and the vodka rocked her into a hazy half-consciousness. She felt connected to Nick, as if the blocky shapes and neon-bright colors and cold electric monotone music had opened a path between them. It was like driving along a gravel road in Dex's Jeep, and not like it at all. She relaxed. Nick sat on the couch and she leaned back so her shoulders rested against his kneecaps.

She didn't know what time it was when Nick yawned and said he wanted to hit the sack. As the blue faded into the vast blackness of the inert screen, an unexpected feeling of suffocation, of falling settled on Nore. She couldn't move, the sensation so paralyzed her. She was aware that Nick had not gotten up to leave the room, but sat there,

his legs pinned behind her back against the couch. His hands found their way to her shoulders. He started massaging them.

"You got a lot a knots in your back," he murmured.

Maybe she went with Nick to his room out of loneliness. Maybe she realized, as he worked his hands into the stiff muscles below her neck, that Nick could offer her a different kind of tenderness than what she'd felt with Dex. She'd often gotten the sense that, as alluring as Nick tried to present himself—older, established with a job, a new truck, money to burn—that he was still a filled-out version of the boys who sat in the back of study hall, the skinny ones in baggy jeans who played D&D and who never got a date. Later, she would not be able to tell herself why, only that everything that had happened in her life—her father's death, Dex's breaking his hand, her helping him, falling for him, and now helping Nick push her t-shirt over her head, felt inevitable, as though she'd been read the script of her life long ago.

CHAPTER 11

By the time school resumed in January, two things had occurred. The first was that she'd moved back in with her mother. Coming to a place of being able to live with her mother again had not been easy. It wasn't like when her father died. That grief was something she to live with, to tolerate—not something she could mend, a burned-out part she could replace—more like an amputee accepts the phantom limb. Nore did not forgive easily, and if she was honest with herself, she did not move back in with Gertie because she'd forgiven her. The Bufords were nice, but they'd started asking her to come to their Pentecostal church with them, and hinting that maybe she should start doing chores around the house to help out, and Nore would not be anyone's maid. She figured she'd stew over her anger anyway, and so she might as well do it in her own bed rather than under Dollie's itchy ruffled comforter.

The second thing that happened was she missed her period. In early February, Nore thought she'd gotten the flu. She spent several mornings home from school when she woke up ill, and her mother, as though eager to show Nore she was really sorry about the tools, asked if she should take off from the factory to schedule an appointment with the doctor. Nore put her off, saying it was probably just a stomach bug and she'd pull through it.

One Monday, a weekend of freezing rain had shellacked all the trees and roads in ice, cancelling school for a day and keeping Gertie home from work. The power went out on their street when an iced-over tree limb knocked out a transformer, and Nore had gotten back into bed after the phone call came that school was cancelled. She lay with the covers pulled up to her chin as the warmth bled out of the house, watching the glassy twigs of the tree outside scrape across the window panes.

The house was empty. They'd run out of milk that morning. Her mother had gone down to the corner store to buy a fresh carton, and stayed there, Nore suspected, to watch the weather report on the black-and-white ten-inch that Buddy, the owner, kept on the shelf across from the register. Her mother had always liked to be in the middle of a catastrophe. She called all her friends whenever a bad storm was coming through, went to the window whenever the fire truck wailed by, sometimes even putting on her shoes to walk down the street after it, followed celebrity breakups in her magazines with sympathy-veiled glee.

Her stomach gave a familiar nudge and a faint shimmer passed across her vision. She jogged the familiar path to the bathroom and as she lifted the seat of the toilet, she realized. It came to her as clear and keen as the owl's hoot from the bird clock at midnight. She heaved, then flushed the toilet, washed out her mouth. Got back into bed.

She slid a hand to her belly, then jerked it away and buried it beneath her pillow. She didn't *feel* pregnant; at least, not beyond the sickness. She didn't have those weird food cravings. Her stomach was no pudgier than it had been a month ago. She had, though, suddenly become curiously aware of time—every passing moment, hour, like a

second pulse inside her, syncopated with her heartbeat in a way that addled her, made her breathless, unable to catch up to that rhythm.

In her time away from home living with the Bufords, she'd gone over and over her mother's attempts to win Mr. Palmer's interest—no, more like his approval—and concluded that anything her mother had done to win favor in the eyes of the pastor and the congregation at First Baptist had been a subtraction for Nore. Given the second thing, Nore couldn't imagine how she could have wrecked the scales more thoroughly—the shame her mother would face, an unwed pregnant girl under her roof. Nore felt a kind of painful satisfaction, like digging out an ingrown hair. Other moments, she was so scared she couldn't breathe.

Sexual education in Fergus in 1982 was hardly informative. Freshman year, the school nurse mailed a permission form to your parents weeks before the health teacher (usually a coach) was due to divide the boys and girls into separate classes so they could watch their gender-specified film about puberty, a black-and-white cartoon from the fifties that explained how a sperm and egg met, but not the mechanics of whole operation. Then the nurse would come in and guardedly answer questions. No one dared ask about birth control for fear of being singled out a possible tramp. What Nore knew about that particular subject she'd learned after lights-out at seventh grade slumber parties, or in the rare progressive women's magazine that happened to be lying around a dentist's office. Her one night with Boone Peyton he'd used a rubber, but she hadn't spoken to Dex about it. When Dex came over, he sometimes had a condom, sometimes not. She did not know how to bring up the subject to him, but she also kept quiet out of a

deeper fear that he'd be somehow insulted or embarrassed. And the Pill or a diaphragm—well, for those, she knew you had to get a doctor's appointment, and that would mean dragging her mother into her business.

Instead, she'd prescribed for herself old wives tales: she'd taken a lot of hot baths, slept with a chicken bone under her pillow, jumped backwards seven times after Dex left on Sundays. If she was honest with herself, she hadn't really given the possibility of pregnancy much thought—that was something that happened to other girls, the unlucky ones.

But now that it had happened, she was faced with an additional dilemma: she did not know who'd fathered the child in the first place. Her heart told her it was Dex, though she could not be sure. From what little she knew about babies, it was too early to tell. She tried to imagine what it would be like a few months from now, her stomach round as a globe, but could not picture her life past that. Imagining a baby in her arms, her own child, was beyond her ken. All she could see was herself waddling down the halls at school. The other girls whispering *slut* and *whore*, and the nurse calling her into the freshmen Health Sciences class to give a speech about abstinence, like that one girl who got pregnant a few years ago had done. Nore would become the Example.

The tree scratched across the window again, and the noise put an acute fire in her legs, and made her squeeze her jaw, so hard her teeth ached. She threw the bedcovers aside and started pulling on clothes. Jeans, a sweatshirt so old the cotton lining was rough as Scotch Brite, her puffed nylon jacket, two layers of socks. There was a pair of her father's old steel-toed workboots in the utility room, and she stuffed newspaper into the

toes to fit her feet. It was hard to see as she laced the boots over her jeans, only the dim blue ice-light from the side door window.

The boots crunched through the crust of sleet and frozen rain that had built up on the grass. Nore set off east, moving as the crow flies through the unlocked fences of backyards, avoiding the places where she knew guard dogs would be waiting to bellow out a warning. She crossed over ditches half-frozen with runoff and mud, scabs of ice floating silently down rivers made overnight by the rain. She felt as though she trudged through a kind of underworld, everything made darker compared to the whiteness of the ice. The clouds hovered low, pressing down like the dropped tile ceilings of the high school. She wanted to reach up to see if she could lift a square of those clouds, to check if the sun still shone beyond them.

She didn't realize until she recognized the block of neat ranch houses that she'd been traveling toward Dollie's house. She passed the neighborhood park with its swing set and jungle gym. A few mothers huddled in parkas by the picnic tables, braving the cold for the sake of running some of the pent-up energy out of their kids. The children pushed each other through the ice-slickened tunnels, or slid on cookie sheets down the slope to a spillway. Nore recognized Dollie, in her purple and faux-fur jacket, by the swings. She alternated pushing two children, a boy and a girl who looked to be around five or six. They must have belonged to Dollie's oldest sister, Janie.

Nore hovered at the edge of the playground, listening to the children's cries echo against the hardened surfaces of the world, made bright and harsh like a bad recording. Dolly's cheeks were red in the cold air, no delicate flush but as deep a crimson as though

she'd been slapped. Her niece and nephew kept demanding she push them higher, even though both were old enough to know how to pump their legs, to propel themselves. She watched until the children started whining for lunch, and Dollie took each of their mittened hands in hers and walked them across the street to the opposite sidewalk, the white fur on the hood of Dollie's coat whisked away from her ears by the wind. The three vanished around the corner, but instead of following them, Nore turned around and walked back the way she'd come.

When she reached her own street, Sycamore, she went through the gate in the chain-link fence that surrounded the old cemetery. There was a memorial bench beneath the big tree, the sycamore that crowned their street corner. East-west streets in Fergus were named for trees, north-south for states. She sat. A skin of ice had frozen atop the lace of lichens and moss that grew on the granite bench, and it was cold beneath her. The newest grave in that cemetery belonged to Ruth Caruthers, wife and mother, 1886-1923. Nore could barely read her name on the blackened marble headstone. Four half-buried white rectangles next to her read BABY. No one had been buried here for sixty years. Nore didn't know of any Carutherses still living in Fergus

They'd buried her father in the new cemetery, the one with the military park and columned mausoleum on the east side of town a few blocks from the country club. Two times a year, she and her mother went to place a fresh American flag in the slot in his headstone. But it was here she felt closest to her father. Here, where the graves were forgotten and being slowly devoured by grass.

Nick had tried to get in touch with her after they spent Christmas night together. When he wasn't on tour at a job site, he usually called around nine-thirty at night. Nore hung up on him the first time, not out of anger but simply because she did not know what to say. She knew the moment after she slept with him that she didn't love him—or at least, that she didn't feel for him what she'd felt for Dex. He left messages with Gertie asking for her, and her mother came after Nore, needling her with questions about why she kept "leading this good-for-nothing Louisiana roughneck down the primrose path."

Patricia followed her into the bathroom one day. Nore came out of the stall wiping her mouth and found Patricia balancing on the edge of the sink closest to the door.

"My brother," she said, "is driving himself bonkers trying to get ahold of you. What's the deal? Why are you sick all the time?"

Nore rinsed her mouth in the sink, fresh queasiness filling the emptied chamber of her stomach.

"Patricia," she said, then stopped. She bent and checked for feet beneath stall doors. She straightened and began again. "I'm pregnant."

Patricia slipped off the sink. She took a step toward Nore, then halted, mouth agape.

"Wow, um. I guess that explains a lot." Comprehension bloomed across her face.

"Is it Nick's?"

Nore slumped against the smudged beige divider of the nearest stall.

"I'm not sure."

"Who else?"

Near the toe of Nore's shoe, a blackened gob of chewing gum spanned the crack between two tile squares.

"Dex Langley." She looked up at Patricia. "You won't tell Nick?"

Patricia crossed the expanse of gray floor and laid her palm across the barely-perceptible bulge in Nore's flesh.

"There's a baby in there." She sounded both curious and reverent at once, as though the thing growing inside Nore were a new species of plant that could cure cancer. "Does it kick?"

"Not yet."

"You don't want to—I mean, I know a place in Shreveport, a clinic we can go to."

Nore's legs tingled, her head felt light. She pushed against the wall behind her for support.

"I've thought about that. But how much does that kind of thing cost?"

"I don't know." Patricia's hand warmed Nore's belly for a few moments more. "Probably a lot."

"I don't know, Patricia," Nore echoed, "I don't know."

She started to cry, and swiped at her eyes angrily. Patricia ripped some toilet paper off a roll and dabbed at Nore's face.

"Shh, it's okay," she said. "It'll be okay." Then she added, like an afterthought, "I won't tell Nick."

Nore did not tell Dollie. Though she thought she could trust Dollie with the secret, she could not bear the look of disappointment she imagined would crease her friend's face once she'd learned the truth. Dollie had never pointed out the differences in how she and Nore lived their lives, and yet Nore had always suspected that a vein of superiority lurked behind Dollie's kindness and serenity, as though her exemption from Nore and Patricia's more earthly concerns made her compassion possible.

Nore and Patricia took to going out to the Ag barn for long heart-to-hearts without Dollie; nights when Nick was out working in the oilfields, Nore slept over at their house. Patricia understood her. Sometimes, when Nore and Patricia had their heads bent together, writing notes back-and-forth on an F-marked quiz, Nore noticed Dollie slide her eyes to them from her spot a few seats away. Dollie would see them—their newfound exclusivity, visible and yet as impenetrable as the curved glass of a fishbowl—and spend the remainder of the class staring at her lap, her cheeks pale and mouth drawn into a knot.

It hurt Nore to treat Dollie this way—Dollie who used to cry with Nore behind the gym in junior high when girls teased her about her unfashionably long hair and ankle-length skirts. It hurt her, but she did not have the words to explain to Dollie why it had to be like this between them. When Dollie started taking her lunch into the library alone, Nore knew she had to forget it all, those memories of their friendship—the evenings watching *Little House on the Prairie*, chocolate gravy breakfasts, summer afternoons wading after crawfish in the creek when they were little—part of a girlhood she enclosed in a hedge without a gate.

Thinking it would help curb the nausea, Nore tried not to eat too much; the resulting headaches, dizziness, and scorched empty space next to her ballooning midsection made her feel as though she had swallowed a sort of capsulized loneliness and guilt, two-toned, a thing she had to shake out onto her palm each morning and consume.

In the end, someone else told her mother about Nore's condition. Right before that, when she was about four months along and beginning to show, kids at school started giving her long looks in the hallways, and wide berths when she passed. It was like the time Denise Evans came down with the clap, and parents started demanding that all the bathrooms be cleaned twice as often, and soon after that Denise stopped coming to school. The day before her mother confronted her, an afternoon in late March, the school counselor, Mrs. Owen, called Nore out of study hall and sat her down for what she called "a chat."

"I've heard some troubling rumors, Nore," Mrs. Owen said. While she enumerated those rumors, Nore curled her feet around the legs of her chair. It was just like when she'd been kicked off the spirit squad. The counselor used the same stock phrases: "bad example," "role model." Who cared that much? Nore wanted to ask her. Surely, by now, no one was surprised.

Gertie came home from her shift at the Carnation plant the next day and started cooking supper, her midweek breakfast-for-dinner of Bisquick biscuits and bacon. Nore sat down at the table and pulled a piece of bacon from the napkin her mother put down on the plate to soak up the extra grease. She broke the bacon into tiny pieces and thumbed

them into her mouth, letting the taste of fat and salt dissolve on her tongue. Her mother filled a plate for herself but she also only picked, kept looking out the window and tapping her soft pack of menthols. She took Nore's empty plate to the sink, then turned and leaned against the edge, the fluorescent bar light over her head shadowing the skin beneath her eyes almost green.

"So, how long were you gonna wait to tell me you're making me a grandma?"

"What?"

"The school called me today. The principal said I needed to come in for a conference. Said me, you, and him needed to discuss some 'alternative school possibilities.' Some policy that says you can't have a pregnant girl at school."

Nore scraped at a spot on the table where the laminate was starting to peel.

"'Till I was sure, I guess," said Nore.

"How far along do you reckon?"

Nore curved in her shoulders, then released them. "Maybe four months?"

Gertie sucked in air, held it, then exhaled explosively. She continued on with her battery of questions, a pained but determined crease etched between her brows.

"Who's the daddy?"

Nore looked down at the nicked skin of the table.

"I'm not sure."

The buzz of the light thrummed in her ears.

Her mother crossed the room, tapped out a cigarette for herself, and lit it. The house wren warbled from the bird clock over the table. Gertie pointed her face toward the

window, a thread of smoke curling up toward the light. At last the turned around, anger and disappointment and—perhaps some guilt?—had carved deep fissures around her mouth and eyes.

"My mother would have turned me out," she whispered. "Not even having a man to stand by me." She stubbed the cigarette out in the sink. "I'm glad your daddy's in his grave," she continued. "This would have broke his heart."

Her mother picked her up from school a few days later. Gertie drove past the football stadium and Sonic to First Baptist, its steeple the highest point in town other than the water tower, visible from I-20 as a white point, strictly triangular over the furry canopy of the pines.

Gertie switched off the engine.

"Hon, I know it's been hard on you, me working all the time, your daddy not around to help us out. I feel like this is my fault. I haven't been the mother I should. But I'm trying to do the right thing, here." She pointed to the church doors. "I want you to talk to someone who knows better than me what that right thing is."

Nore went with her mother into the church. She followed her more out of curiosity than anything, though the vastness of the place, with the lights in the sanctuary turned off and the halls emptied of worshippers, struck her as eerie. She drew in the church's smell: the chemical odor of cheap red Berber carpet, lemon polish on the pews, the musty felt on the sequined tapestries. Up behind the pulpit, the props from this year's

Passion Play tilted against the choir banister, markers for places the actors had abandoned at the end of the their last rehearsal.

Her mother must have sensed Nore dawdling because she reached behind her and grasped Nore's arm. They came to a wing of offices. Her mother rapped one of the doors, beside Mr. Palmer's brass placard.

The door opened and Nore saw the twin moons of Mr. Palmer's spectacles before the rest of him. He held the door wider and they filed inside.

"Pastor Palmer," her mother said, her voice two rungs above a whisper, "if you've got a minute, I got to talk to you."

He scooped the air over two plush chairs opposite his desk. They sat. At his desk, Mr. Palmer steepled his fingers and arranged his blunt features into a neutral expression.

Gertie dabbed at her eyes with the corners of a crumpled Kleenex she pulled from her purse.

"I don't know how to say this. But my daughter...Nore's gone and got herself a baby on the way," she said.

Mr. Palmer pressed his hands together, mouth flatlining.

"I see."

"I don't know what to do. She's a good girl. I thought her daddy and I raised her right, but maybe—maybe this is God telling me I've done wrong."

The pastor canted his head to the side, considering them.

"I see," he repeated. "I think you'd be wrong to consider this child a curse, Gertie, though it certainly has come out of undoubted sin."

Gertie clutched the edge of his desk, nodding. Nore turned her face to the wall. She hated her mother at this moment, more than the pastor. Him, she regarded with an almost impersonal, obligatory loathing, nothing like this sudden jaw-clenching hatred for her mother's weakness.

"She won't tell me who the daddy is," Gertie continued.

"I see," Mr. Palmer said. Every time he said it, it seemed to Nore that the words lost their meaning, became mere sounds. He could have said "I see" or "Icy" or "A sea."

"Nore, Saint James tells us here that we believers are to confess our faults to one another so that we may be healed. How can you, or the father of this child, be healed if you hold this sin inside of you?"

"Hon," Gertie said, "please listen to us."

But Nore pressed her lips together and stared at the diploma hanging behind the pastor's desk, framed and prominent as a doctor's medical degree.

"I wonder that you don't seem to care what happens to your soul, Nore. What if something happens to you? Would you want to be separated from the baby's soul forever?"

Nore jerked her eyes back to the pastor, but his glasses only reflected light back to her.

"The baby's soul?" she asked.

Mr. Palmer nodded and tapped the Bible.

"You wouldn't want to put the baby's place in eternity in jeopardy, not giving it a good Christian home, would you? If you don't marry the baby's father, that might not happen."

Nore looked down at the fists balled in her lap, so tight she was not sure her hands could ever uncurl. She did not want to believe in a God who would separate a mother from her child for eternity. She reckoned she could take that risk—not knowing—for herself, but for her baby? She had felt the first stirrings weeks ago, not kicks but a sensation more like crickets, or moths brushing their wings together in her stomach. When had another soul slid down into her?

"I don't want to get married," she whispered.

Mr. Palmer looked from Nore to Gertie. "If she doesn't want to marry the baby's father, there is another option."

Gertie held onto that desk harder, like it was the last piece floating of a sunken ship.

"What other option?"

"If it were a daughter of mine, I'd give the baby to a good family who could take care of it. A nice Christian family. I think that's her only route in this situation. She doesn't want to completely ruin her reputation, if she doesn't have to."

The pastor opened a drawer in his desk and slid out a pamphlet that he put into Gertie's hands. "This place, they'll take Nore in until the baby comes. They'll find a good home for the baby, and she can go there without feeling embarrassed. There will be other

girls there. She can be with them and relax, there will be nice ladies there who can help her make the wisest choice. They'll help her do the right thing."

"You're talking about adoption," Nore said. Her mother and the pastor discussed her fate like she wasn't in the room anymore. Outside the pastor's window, a redbud tree pressed its fuchsia beads against the glass.

"Those places cost something," Gertie said. Twin roses of embarrassment stained her cheeks.

Mr. Palmer ran his fingers along the pencil groove of his desk.

"The state pays for this place, if you meet certain aid requirements. But I know of a fund the elders keep here for girls like Nore. We'd take care of it. But this is more important than money, Mrs. Wilson. We're talking about doing the right thing for the baby's soul. For your soul," Mr. Palmer continued. His voice was as smooth as the polished top of the desk, a doctor's bedside voice. "Christ sacrificed himself for us. He expects us to follow His example."

Nore couldn't see how Jesus would expect her to give her child away. This all seemed wrong, a logic so bent and snarled she could not make it straight. Her temples pulsed with hot pressure. And yet, this was a way. That place in Shreveport—Nore had had nightmares about it, envisioned a giant needle, a sucking sound like a vacuum deafening her dream-self's ears so profoundly she'd sometimes woken with her real ears humming. This—this place, it was another way.

Gertie wound her fingers around Nore's forearm.

"Hon, if the pastor says you ought to go away, then I think that's best. I don't got an answer for this one. I can help you out here, sure, but I can't make this decision."

The world was tipping away from her, everything doubled in that mirror-dark desk. She pressed a hand to her belly; the flesh beneath her fat was hard as a summer watermelon. She thought *this baby will be my father's first grandchild*, and then that thought dissolved into a rainstorm gully of a worse thought: *I am not worthy to have that baby*. Mr. Palmer had said it would be a sacrifice on her part, the "right thing" to do. She would be a bad person if she kept this baby, and everyone would know it.

She thought someone else was speaking before she realized the words had left her own mouth.

"I'll go. I'll do it," she said.

"Good girl," the pastor said. "You're doing the right thing."

Dex

He found out about Nore's baby the same week she disappeared. After she ran down the hill from the water tower, had ignored him and his notes at school and hung up when he called, he was not sure how to think or feel.. He saw her in the halls, paler and shuffling with heavy steps, and something always held him back from going up to her, like he dragged around an invisible stake and tether that was always shorter than the distance to where she was.

He hadn't had much time to stew over Nore. He'd gotten a letter in the mail in February informing him he'd been accepted in A&M, and received a half-scholarship based on his grades. The months until the end of the semester were sliding away from

him like crumbs on a titled plate. He was a senior. He and the other seniors got to start missing class every week so the choir teacher could teach them their graduation song.

Then, in March, while Coach Jenkins put on a video about the JFK assassination so he could sit at his desk with the basketball playbook, some girls in the back of the room started talking about how Nore was missing again, and how it was only a matter of time until she quit altogether.

Dex lifted his head from his desk—he'd been half asleep—and looked back at the girls.

"Only a matter of time until she quits what?" he murmured.

One of the girls, Jenny Kline, twitched up one eyebrow in a smug sort of gesture.

"School, of course. Can't come around here with a baby on the way," she said, speaking to him as though he were a third grader.

Dex wasn't sure what his face looked like, but Jenny Kline's expression of superiority changed to one of curiosity, and then concern.

"Dex? Everything all right?"

He shook his head, turned, put it back on the desk, and curled his arms around his ears like he was playing heads-up-seven-up. A pile of twitching gray mush sat where his brain had once been. At lunch, he couldn't eat. He sat mute while Harris put away two rectangles of pizza, two cartons of chocolate milk, two cups of fruit cocktail. Dex didn't go to his next class. Instead, he went out to the parking lot where his Jeep was parked. Across the white rectangle of gravel he saw a lone girl leaning against the wall of the Ag

barn. A limp breeze carried the odor of her cigarette to his nose. He twirled the keys to his Jeep on their green lanyard for a few minutes, then set off toward her.

Nore's friend, Patricia, froze with the cigarette halfway to her lips. She pushed aside her curtain of thin dark hair and looked him up and down, a gaze so severe Dex could practically feel it scraping his skin.

"What do you want?" Patricia asked.

Dex gulped down a lump in his throat.

"Nore around?"

"Why do you care?"

He shoved his hands deep into his pockets and toed at the gravel.

"Look, we can talk in questions all day or you can tell me where she is."

"I didn't think you really cared about her."

Thinking of Alma, not sure he could trust Patricia to keep her mouth shut about their conversation, Dex shrugged, trying to affect indifference.

"Maybe I just wonder why she's been gone so much. We, ah, have a project due."

Patricia pulled on her cigarette and then tossed it into the butt-littered fringe of weeds curling against the side of the building.

"Well, you don't need to worry about it. She's with my brother now."

Dex yanked his eyes from the ground. The afternoon light slanted sideways into her face and she squinted into it, making it hard to read her expression for its truthfulness. He pulled his keys from his pocket.

"You just tell her I was looking for her," he said.

He got in his Jeep, sat in the seat for a while tapping his finger on the gearshift. Then he stiffened his resolve and drove over to Nore's house. He parked the car behind a rusty Plymouth a few houses down and stared at the empty space beneath the carport, where the old Cadillac usually sat, where Nore had fixed his Jeep's carburetor.

Clean out the pipes, Coach Maddox had told him. *Clear your mind*. *Do what you have to do.* He'd done what the coach had said, or tried to. Up until this point in his life, listening to adults had always gotten him where he wanted. The options before him spread themselves out like the Xs and Os of the plays his coaches had drilled into his brain since he was five years old. He traced the curved stems of the arrows leading from point A to point B, from decision to action to consequence.

He had thought about the possibility of Nore's getting pregnant—truly, he had. He'd gotten a handful of rubbers from his friend Harris, but was never able to work up the gumption to ask for more when those ran out. To buy them, you had to ask the pharmacist to get them from behind the counter, and Dex's father knew everyone, and what if someone told his father?

When Dex had turned thirteen, his pop took him out on a "hunting trip" to a cabin that belonged to one of his work buddies. After two days of slogging through marshes in rubber dungarees and hunching in duck blinds, his father, grim-faced and refusing eye contact, had slipped Dex a pamphlet from the doctor's office and said to come after him if he had any questions—which of course Dex never did, to their mutual relief. So, with Nore, Dex had mostly practiced the only other option he knew, what he'd once heard an old guy at the barber shop call "evacuation." Sometimes he'd managed to do it in time,

and sometimes had not. Though he and Nore were able to discuss many topics he and Alma couldn't, the vocabulary of sex and love was not one of them. And look where his cowardice and ignorance had gotten them.

He could go and sit on those cinderblock steps outside Nore's house and wait for her and her mother to come home. He could tell his parents the whole thing. Maybe they would talk to Nore's mother, would work something out. Maybe he and Nore would have to get married. Maybe not. He had a baby to think about, now. The worries of the weeks before, about football and college and his girlfriend, should mean nothing, were a boy's troubles.

And yet, he did not feel like a man. Football and college and Alma still mattered. He tried to envision telling her, and couldn't. *I'm sorry. I'm having a baby with another girl.* He tried to imagine telling his parents. He pictured his pop kicking out the headlights of his Jeep in anger, even though it wasn't something his father would ever do. And Patricia had said that Nore had moved on from him to another guy, her brother. He could not be sure that she spoke the truth, but the idea snuck feelers into his brain, started to put down roots. She would be looked after, at least. Her and the baby.

He could not get out of the Jeep. His feet were welded to the Jeep's blue aluminum floor. Along the rhombus of front yards narrowing toward the Wilsons' house, the husks of cars and faded plastic toys and tires and scraps of corrugated tin rose out of the tender spring grass as though it all had been submerged, the new growth shrinking away like swamp water.

He stayed in the Jeep until the DeVille came around the corner and growled up the drive. Nore's mother got out and went around to the trunk to unload some grocery bags. Dex waited for Nore to get out of the car, but saw that the passenger seat was empty. Mrs. Wilson bowed her arms around two brown sacks and went into the house by the side door. Dex thought he saw, for a moment, a shadow move across the blinds in the front room, a ripple that made his guts clench. No one came out of the house.

Dex would remember that shadow for years, wondering if Nore had been watching him sit in the Jeep those hours, unable to get out of it. When it started to get dark, and Reggie would be wondering if Dex was ever going to get around to driving the two of them home, Dex left.

If any evidence of the turmoil of the previous few hours lingered on Dex's face when he picked Reggie up from basketball practice, his younger brother didn't seem to notice it. Reggie threw his athletics bag into the back, clambered up into the Jeep, and slammed the door shut.

Dex jammed the gearshift and reversed hard, gravel popping under the tires. "This ain't your car yet, kid. Don't slam my doors," he grumbled.

Reggie scowled.

"What's got your panties twisted up?"

"Nothing, I just don't like people knocking around shit that not theirs."

Reggie's face went stormy for a minute, but he then gave a little shrug and started rooting around for the lever that would lay back his seat.

"Quit that," Dex said, a galloping sort of feeling kicking up in his chest.

"I'm beat," Reggie said, "Coach had us do about fifty pivot drills, I feel like raw meat."

"You think you got problems?" Dex said, "Don't go telling them to me."

"What's with you? What did I do?"

"You're just a selfish kid, you know that?" Dex said, that galloping sensation more like a train now, a careening freight train. "You've had everything just given to you."

Reggie looked like he might punch Dex.

"You're outta your mind," he yelped.

The Jeep ground to a stop in the shoulder and Dex pointed to the door.

"Get out," he said. "Get out of the car."

He expected Reggie to hit him now—he *wanted* his brother to hit him—but Reggie did not. Dex couldn't hit him first. Instead, Reggie grabbed his athletics bag and set off walking into the dusk, in the wet cool air that was almost spring air. Dex wanted to call Reggie back, but he knew his brother would be too proud to turn around now. He got out of the car and followed Reggie a few paces. Reggie dropped the bag, spun around, and faced him.

"If you want to hit me, get on with it. It'll make us both feel better, I reckon," Reggie said.

Dex curled his hands into fists. The middle knuckle on his right ached. Then his body sagged. As he turned to get back in the Jeep, he slipped a little in the slick pine duff on the side of the road. He could still drive back and knock on the Wilsons' door, despite

the late hour. And yet, he could not. When he'd turned past the cemetery and the bamboo grove at the end of Sycamore, it was as though something had risen out of the earth behind him. His father had once told him that bamboo was the fastest-growing plant on earth. "Grows so fast," his pop said, "when I was a kid I used to cut a notch near the base of one and spend a single afternoon watching it inch up out of the ground." It was one of the species that his father, as a county forester, spent countless days ripping out and poisoning, trying to keep it from overtaking native trees. As the last daylight drained out of the sky, Dex imagined leafy shoots push up through the road, knocking over the crumbling tombstones in the cemetery, obscuring his view of the shambles of that little neighborhood. A wall of green separating his past from his future.

CHAPTER 12

Nore

The girls at the Loving Alternatives home called it "going over" when a girl was taken to the hospital. Nore would come downstairs to breakfast and there would be one place less set at the table, the other girls munching their dry toast and saying, "Becky went over last night at three. They took her over," meaning she'd been driven down the road to Sisters of Mercy Hospital.

There were about twelve girls at a given time living in the house. Nore was six months along when she arrived in May. She hadn't brought any maternity clothes with her, but the social workers who ran Loving Alternatives had endless amounts of shapeless donated shirts, sweatpants, and tent-like muumuus to drape over her swelling body. Another girl, Harriet, also six months, had also dropped out of her senior year. The house mother put her and Nore in the same room together, a decision Nore was grateful for because it meant they could become friends: they went to the same GED and beauty school classes at the alternative vocational school, and both were assigned the least-desired chore of cleaning the bathrooms.

Harriet was half Haitian, with lovely night-dark eyes, curly brown hair, skin the shade of new penny loafers. The story of her baby's conception was not as happy as Nore's—that was another thing; outside of your due date, the girls also tended to rank one another based on the circumstances of her arrival at the maternity home. The other

girls went about their duties—sweeping the dining room, cooking, vacuuming the bedrooms, washing sheets and hanging them to dry—without looking at her or speaking to her, as though the tragedy that draped girls such as Harriet might smother them if they got too close.

Harriet had been raped by her stepfather. Nore learned this a month into sharing a room with her, when Harriet's crying in her sleep night after night woke her, and Nore finally worked the story out of her. Harriet told her how it had splintered the family. Her own mother, afraid of losing her new husband's love, decided that Harriet must be disturbed, that she must have lead him on, and refused to go with Harriet to meet with the court-appointed mediator.

Nore wondered how Harriet could stand it all—beyond the horror show she'd been living in, how could she manage it, coming to the last place on earth where she might be accepted, and still regarded as something unsightly to be swept under a rug? After she got the truth out of Harriet, Nore asked her how she felt about the others' treatment of her.

Harriet said, "At least here I know it isn't personal. Your own flesh and blood turn on you, that's a pain you can't begin to understand. Like someone cut out your heart and lungs and tried to stuff them back in wrong-side up. Strangers, they're nothing to me."

When Harriet said this, Nore's own chest tightened, Harriet's words dredging up a phantom of the pain she'd felt sitting between her mother and the pastor in the church office.

Harriet's father—her real father, who worked at a battery plant in Port Arthur—came to visit Harriet every Saturday. The girls at Loving Alternatives were discouraged from eating sweets (something about sugar being bad for the development of the fetus) so Harriet's father always brought with him a sack of assorted donut holes from Dunkin' Donuts that he disguised in a JC Penny bag. He'd check Harriet and Nore out of the home for a day and drive them to a nearby mall. Nore thought they made quite a pair, a black girl and a white girl waddling by windows full of shoes and clothes their bodies were too swollen to fit. She looked forward to those afternoons fiercely.

Every girl at the home received letters and the occasional phone call from their families, but the social workers never let you talk by yourself. The only phone in the house was on the desk in the house mother's office, and someone always sat with you while you talked. The social workers said it was to provide emotional support if it was needed, but Nore thought it was to keep girls from talking to their babies' fathers. Any time she complained about the chores or the food, a staff member was quick to remind Nore of the shame Loving Alternatives was saving her, of the great service they were doing by finding a good home for her baby, the good home she was incapable of providing. "You're so young. You can have the baby and get on with your life."

The baby (the staff never referred to the babies as "yours." It was always "the baby" or "it") was kicking so strong now, Nore had to dash off to the bathroom every ten minutes. It only quieted when she walked, lulled as Nore paced the rose gardens steaming under the summer sun. She adopted a kind of meditative shuffle when it became almost impossible to sleep lying down. Other girls sometimes cooed and murmured to their

babies, or sang under their breath like they were rehearsing lullabies. Nore did neither of these things. The papers she'd been given to look over while she waited, the ones with information about the different families she could choose to take the baby, referred to her role as the "birth mother" or the "biological mother." She called herself that whenever she thought about it. She was a cog, a vessel, a function of biology—it did not have to be more complicated than that.

After a girl gave birth, there was a legally required waiting period before the adoptive parents could claim the child. Couples came in the afternoons to visit with the girls who'd given birth, to hold the baby and practice bottle-feeding it. The women were always unsure the first time a baby was put into her arms, as though afraid it might fracture at her touch. Often, their faces pinched in and went watery with tears, they were so happy to hold that warm little bundle. The social workers told the girls that giving up their children was the "gift of life" to these men and women. Nore came to see the girls that backed out—who at the last second decided to keep their children—as weak. Selfish.

One day, as Harriet and Nore lumbered up and down the promenade of the mall, Harriet suddenly gripped Nore's arm. Nore turned her wrist and doubled the hold, thinking Harriet was about to fall. But her friend just looked at her, her long, inky lashes curling up like palm fronds.

"Nore," Harriet said, "I don't think I can do it. I can't give him away."

Harriet was having a little boy. She'd gone in for a sonogram a few weeks before, had been uncharacteristically quiet since.

Nore held to Harriet's arm more tightly.

"You didn't even have a choice," she hissed. "He'll remind you of it—of *him*—every day."

"That man can rot in hell," Harriet said, "but giving away my baby won't make me forget."

Nore glanced back to Harriet's father. He had a kind, sad face, the skin pulling down around his eyes as though invisible fingers tugged at it. He always followed them like a watchful, faithful dog, and had stopped walking when they had. He now stared through the window of an electronics store. A wall of televisions all showing the same image: sand dribbling through the hourglass behind the yellow *Days of Our Lives* title card.

"I just can't bear it. The folks who want to take my son, I don't know a thing about them. *Mister so-and-so is a lawyer, Missus so-and-so is a housewife.* What if they hit my baby, or don't love him like I could? I haven't done a useful thing my whole life. Maybe—maybe raising up my son, that can be a good thing."

Nore's baby pressed its feet against the inside of her belly. Her hand went to it, and she could feel the heel, round and small as a kidney bean against her fingers.

Harriet went over early.

She was only eight months. Her water broke in the middle of the night. The last of Harriet that Nore saw were her eyes—the irises two empty places against the whites, rolling over her shoulder at Nore's bed as the nurse hustled her out. Nore didn't see her again. She overheard a social worker the next day saying that Harriet's father had picked

her and the baby up from the hospital. Nore found herself longing to ask what Harriet had named her boy. That suddenly seemed like an important thing, the *most* important thing—his name. As though a name made you a real person.

Nore spent the entire next night shuffling the length of her room. As dawn colored the horizon faintly green, she knew now what she had to do.

She crept downstairs as quietly as she could, given the continental proportions her body had reached. The door to the house mother's office was locked, but Nore had practiced picking it one of the nights the baby had kept her awake, a thing she'd wanted to do at the time out of a rebellious kind of boredom. Once inside, she wedged a chair beneath the doorknob and stuffed the throw rug into the crack between the door and the ground. She dialed.

"Yeah?"

Thank God, it was Patricia. Her words were thickened with sleep, but she listened to Nore's whispers explaining the situation. When Patricia spoke again, she sounded more alert, authoritative, even.

"Give me the address. I'll wake Nick. We'll leave now."

After she hung up the phone, Nore carefully arranged the office to look like she hadn't been there, and crept back up the stairs just as the sun broke over the tops of the trees and vaporized the dew.

Nick's Chevy pulled into the horseshoe-shaped drive around one. Nore was spraying the lunch dishes with hot water from the industrial soaker. The front bell rang twice like she'd told Patricia to do, the way she'd know they had come for her. At once,

she dropped the chrome nozzle so hard it cracked one of the plates. She jogged to front door, landed heavily as she jumped from the stoop, and slammed the door of the truck after her. She took nothing with her from that place.

When the baby came into the world, Nore thought she would never stop crying. She was alone in the hospital room. Her mother could not come over until the next morning, and Nick had been unable to find a buddy to sub in for him on the rig. It did not matter to Nore that she was alone. Not after the nurse brought her daughter out to her, the baby's feet still blue with ink where they'd pressed them onto her birth record. Her daughter's eyes were closed, but when the nurse placed her in Nore's sweat-soaked arms, the baby turned her face into Nore's neck and gave a little sigh, as though she recognized her scent. Nore opened her daughter's blanket, exposed her pink skin to the light so she could count every rib marbled with veins, feel the tiny sharp edge of every toe and fingernail.

The doctor who'd delivered Monday wrote on a clipboard at the station across from Nore's hospital bed. He called to the nurse changing bed sheets on the other side of the room.

"Jan, what day is it now? I can't see straight I'm so tired."

The nurse flapped the top sheet like a sail, said, "I think it's Monday, now. Last time I looked it was after midnight."

"Good enough," the doctor sighed. He scribbled on the clipboard.

Monday, Nore thought hazily. Her daughter opened her eyes at that moment. They were a murky sort of blue, an in-between color that the doctor said might not last. Nore thought of Harriet, and the emptiness in her face as the social workers led her from the room. Yes, it is like going over, Nore thought. Over a cliff into a current sweeping out to sea.

The doctor looked up from writing, impatiently, at Nore.

"So what's she going to be? Name?"

Nore put the baby to her breast. She latched on immediately, sucked so hard that two more drops squeezed from Nore's wrung-out tear ducts. She wiped her raw face on the shoulder of the hospital gown, and glanced up at the doctor.

Monday.

CHAPTER 13

July 1985

Nore

The sun had just slipped below the treeline, and the jingle bells looped around the door handle of the Scissor Shack tinkled as Nick came inside. He brought the stink of sweat and asphalt into the beauty parlor's haze of acetone and White Shoulders. His workboots were blackened from his job at the road company, where he'd worked since the drilling outfit let him go sixth months before.

Nore's gloved hands were full of foil strips and the gummy peroxide she painted onto the gray roots of Mrs. Hinkle's hair. Nick removed his concrete-spattered hardhat.

"Evening, babe," he said, pecking Nore's ear with his mouth as she turned her head. His lips, chapped from working outside for days, chafed at her skin.

"Hey," Nore said. She wrinkled her nose against the tang of the bleach.

"You ready to go soon?"

"Not for another half hour, I'm guessing."

Mrs. Hinkle smiled up at Nick beneath the jungle of tin foil.

"Your wife agreed to take me at the last minute, blame me!"

Nick rearranged the irritated knot in his brow to one of resigned indulgence.

"You tip her good, then," he said, chuckling tiredly.

Mrs. Hinkle poked Nore's arm with one of her scarlet acrylics.

"That husband of yours is a real sweetheart," she said.

Nore smiled vaguely and painted another stripe of bleach onto the older woman's crinkled hair. She and Nick weren't married, but she sometimes wore a silver band on her left ring finger, and did not correct people when they made the assumption. She'd found it was easier that way. They'd moved to Tyler shortly after Monday was born, found it was easier for Nore to get work than in Fergus; she'd tried to rent a booth at the beauty parlor downtown, but none of the old biddies who got their curls set each week would give her work.

Mrs. Hinkle went under the dryer for twenty minutes, then Nore took out the foil, washed out the bleach, cut, and styled the woman's hair into what was likely the same under-curled blunt curtain the woman had worn for the last thirty years. Women who came into the Scissor Shack did not go there for the latest trends, or for variety, but for the tradition, and that included treating the hairdressers like their confessors.

"How old is that little girl of yours now?" Mrs. Hinkle asked.

"Almost two."

"I got a grandbaby about her age," Mrs. Hinkle said.

"Don't turn your head Mrs. Hinkle; I'll nip your ear."

"Whoops! Sorry. Anyhow, my grandbaby, she was over at my house for supper the other night. Lottie—that's her name—she has got her own little table and chair that sits next to the big table. So I put down her plate and her mama and daddy and I sit down to our food. We were having meatloaf, my mama's recipe. In a bit, here comes Lottie to my chair and she goes, 'Grandmother! I don't got a napkin.' And, I haven't used mine

yet, so I go, 'Lottie, you can have mine.' And my grandbaby looks up at me—you know the way they have sometimes, so serious like little grown-up's—and she goes, 'No, Grandmother, I got to have my *own*.'"

Mrs. Hinkle tittered delicately into the nylon cape velcroed around her neck.

"Isn't that just the sweetest?"

"Sure is," Nore said.

She peeled off the cape when she was finished and passed Mrs. Hinkle a hand mirror so she could examine the back of her head. Nore wasn't bad at cutting hair. She wasn't good, either. She'd hoped to get hired on as a mechanic at the Sears in Tyler. But Nick hadn't wanted her to do that. The mother of his child, he'd said, couldn't go crawling under cars with a bunch of rough, blue collar guys like him drooling over her. And renting out a booth *did* mean that she could more or less set her own hours, for Monday's sake. But having to listen to women like Mrs. Hinkle prattle on all day, she wondered if the compromise had been worth it. Now that she was a mother, she felt like an ant beneath a boy's magnifying glass; other women observing how she indulged or denied Monday's demands, how she dressed her daughter. Who gave her knowing, judging looks when they learned her daughter's name, or whenever she complained about the difficulties of parenting a toddler, quizzed her on the different methods she'd tried, as if they were grading her against a universal rubric.

"Your life's not your own anymore," Gertie was often quick to remind her the few times they spoke over the phone. "It belongs to that girl."

From the Scissor Shack, Nick drove to the house a few blocks away where Mrs. Fir, a widow in her sixties, ran an informal day care out of her house. They found Monday strapped into a booster chair at the kitchen table before of a plate of cold peas and chicken tenders, the breaded meat cut into pieces so fine it was practically minced. Her eyes and cheeks were raw with tears.

"She wouldn't eat a bite," Mrs. Fir said sourly to Nore as Nick carried Monday out to the Chevy. "And she scratched Mikey."

Nore sat at the table in front of Monday's refused supper as she wrote out the babysitter's weekly check. She chewed the side of her right cheek to keep from lashing out at the older woman. Though Mrs. Fir's almost daily criticisms of her daughter grated at her with an almost physical irritation, Nore forced herself to bear up under it because Mrs. Fir's was all they could afford.

Nore ripped out the check and left it on the table without placing it in the babysitter's palm.

"Tomorrow, then," she said, and followed Nick out to the truck. Mrs. Fir closed the door with a snap.

Nick was buckling Monday into the car seat. Her head lolled sleepily against her shoulder. To wake her, he goosed the plump flesh beneath her chin. Monday's eyes popped open, and she giggled. Nore's heart gave a tiny lurch. Her daughter's laugh wasn't a charming child's laugh: she'd inherited her grandma's hiccupping, hyena-like howl. Sometimes, when Nore heard it from another room, the sound would startle her as though someone had slammed a door. The laugh at times made her want to grind her

teeth, and at others nearly want to weep with affection. She found that her reaction to that giggle in a way summed up her feelings for Monday—for being a mother—on the whole. The wild, unpredictable swings between deep annoyance and a breath-freezing love, the memory of almost losing her that inevitably bled into the deep shame of keeping her, not knowing if it had been the right thing to do.

"Thought I'd treat you girls to some ice cream," Nick said, using the affected cheery tone he adopted whenever he was trying to show Nore the impressive breadth of his patience.

"Can't we just go home? I'm bushed," Nore said.

"I worked real hard for that bonus last week," Nick said. "I want to buy my baby girl some ice cream."

Monday corkscrewed her fists in her eyelids, then she blinked up at Nick with a grin. She'd inherited Nore's eyes, that cat-like grayish green, but had a redhead's ginger lashes and freckles, Gertie's round face and high forehead, hair between red and dishwater blonde.

Nore hadn't been sure, when the baby was born, how strongly she would resemble her father. Monday was born bald, and blue-eyed like all babies. As the months passed, Nore became more and more curious to see whose features she would grow into. But even after almost two years, Monday was still stubbornly herself. She hadn't inherited Nick's walnut-dark eyebrows, or showed signs of his wide, stocky build. She had nothing of Dex's long, angular jaw and notched chin. Not even the copper sheen to

her hair could reliably point to Dex, as Nore's father's sister, her Aunt Ora, had been a redhead.

And yet, Nore had known, almost from the moment of Monday's birth, that Dex was her daughter's father. Of course, there was the physical probability—all the times she'd been with him versus the one night with Nick—but more than that, it was the little intangible particularities that made her sure. Like Dex, Monday had the same tendency to worry the small things. As an infant, she had screamed like a piglet if Nore even tried to put her in someone else's arms. She had Dex's curiosity—Nore had found her tireless gaze unsettling, the way her daughter just *stared* at everything, like watching Nore brush her teeth one-handed night after night, Monday's eyes locked on the motion of the toothbrush. She'd started talking early at eleven months, her favorite word, after *mama,* being *what*—always accompanied by an imperious finger pointing at the object she did not have a word for. She rarely played with the baby dolls that Gertie bought for her, preferred instead to mess with the buttons and knobs on Nick's hi-fi whenever he forgot to secure the cabinet door with a child lock. Ever since he lost his job with the drilling company, he'd become increasingly crabby any time he discovered Monday touching the stereo. The first time he'd spanked Monday had been because she pulled all the tape out of one of his 8-tracks.

They pulled into one of the ordering bays at the Sonic. Nick got Monday a blue raspberry snow-cone and an Oreo sundae for himself. Nore wanted nothing.

"You sure, babe? I'm buying," Nick said. She could see that he needed this from her. He needed her to acknowledge that he was trying, that he was a good provider.

“I’m literally not hungry,” Nore said. She sipped at the tepid dregs of the iced tea she’d bought at lunch from the 7-11 across from the Scissor Shack.

Nick gripped the wheel and didn’t look at her while he waited for the car hop to bring out the ice cream.

Monday ate half of her snow-cone, then abruptly fell asleep. The sweetened blue ice spilled across the backseat, and Nick jumped out to mop it up with some of the napkins papered across the floor mats.

“I told you we should just go on home,” Nore said when he climbed back into the driver’s seat.

“Why can’t we have a nice night out once in a while?” Nick asked.

Nore could not answer. On the way back to their apartment, they passed through a dark boulevard of unmanned warehouses, doors barred with padlocks. Behind high fences lurked a jungle of brand-new engines, pipeline, the triangular latticework of derricks, pumpjacks laying in pieces on their sides like dismembered grasshoppers. Lately, pawnshops seemed to be springing up on every corner, cash-now joints blinked their signs like traffic signals. The gas flares that once burned over the oilfields in fiery plumes had winked out, one by one, like a child blowing out birthday candles. It had taken Nick two months to find the job with the road crew. His truck, which he’d once preened over like a purebred dog, now wore a film of dust and globs of pine sap, hairline cracks radiating from a notch in the windshield, an ever-present layer of fast food wrappers in the floorboards. The peppy mood he’d carried into the salon with him that evening was an increasingly rare one.

At home, Nore put Monday to bed, her lips still blue with sugar. It was hard to get Monday to sleep, the little night-owl; Nore didn't want to wake her even to brush her teeth. In bed, the odor of the road—tar, steel solder, cement—lingered beneath the smell of Nick's soap. He rolled on top of her, pushing up her oversized Metallica t-shirt. She was so tired, she was nearly asleep before he finished.

Two mornings later, a Friday, Nick announced that he and some buddies from the road crew planned to go out for some beers after work. Nore was in the bathroom, bathing Monday before they dropped her off at Mrs. Fir's.

"They've been threatening to drag me out with them for ages," Nick said, leaning in the door frame in his work clothes. He laughed, but it was more like a cough. "You should come out with us, babe. Take a night off."

Nore lathered the washcloth with baby wash, the Johnson & Johnson that was the only name brand thing she bought, and lifted the water-darkened curtains of Monday's hair to scrub behind her ears. Nore dislodged a marshmallow from Monday's cereal that had somehow gotten stuck in one of the curls. Nick loved Monday's hair, its thickness and the way it curled up at the ends, like he used to be vain about his truck. Monday got things like gum and food stuck in her hair often, but Nick always persuaded Nore not to cut it.

Nore passed the washcloth gently over her daughter's skin. Monday suddenly frowned, screamed, and brought her hands down on the water, splashing soap up into Nore's eyes and down the front of her shirt. Half-blinded, Nore felt around for a towel.

"Jesus, Nick, help me out?"

"Oh, sorry," Nick said. After a moment, she felt him nudge a towel into her hand. As she dried off, she recalled what Mrs. Fir had said about Monday's burgeoning tendency to parrot everything she and Nick said.

"Mommy said a bad thing," Nore said firmly to Monday. "You don't talk like Mommy."

Monday giggled and splashed more water. Nick remained frozen in the doorway.

"Babe, about tonight?"

"What? Yeah, you know what, sure," Nore now realized she wanted nothing more than a night away from being a mother, a night to feel like a normal nineteen-year-old for once.

"I'll ask Sonia to watch her."

Nore could see the side of Nick's face in the mirror. His lips twitched up into a smile, and he moved into the bathroom to lift Monday from the tub, as though Nore's compliance was the trigger he needed to remember he was a parent, too.

Nore brought Monday to work with her the next day so that Sonia, another hairdresser who rented a booth at the salon, could take Monday home with her after they closed up shop. Sonia was the closest thing to a friend Nore had since leaving Fergus. Patricia dropped by when she could get time off from school at Lovell County Junior College, but the effortless friendship of their high school years had faded into a rote familial fondness. Every time Patricia came to visit wearing one of her LCJC t-shirts, a cool droplet of resentment rolled down Nore's spine—Patricia's new life was just another

reminder that she had missed out, that her stupidity and recklessness had ruined her chance to ever worry about little things like grades or study-dates or getting too trashed at a frat party.

Sonia was ten years older than Nore and twice divorced. On the rare occasion that they both found their afternoon appointment slots empty, they'd walk down the street to the tavern, Jake's, order a round of whiskey and ginger ale, and chalk up cues at the billiards table. The outings were an excuse to bellyache about the entitled women whose hair they styled, or complain about the doltish insensitivities dealt out by the men in their lives. When Nore had told her how she and Nick weren't really married, Sonia had slurped down the remainder of her drink, patted Nore's knee and said, "Thank God for that."

"It's no trouble, right?" Nore asked Sonia for the third time at the end of the day. Nick was due to pick her up in twenty minutes. Her eyes felt gritty, and her back ached from carrying Monday around. The old women who cooed and pawed at Monday frightened her, and had driven her to new heights of clinging neediness. At one point Nore had had to cancel with one of her regulars, Mrs. Laurel, because Monday refused to leave her mother's hip.

"Girl, you go out and have a good time with your man tonight," Sonia said. "I may not have kids but I grew up with six brothers and sisters. I reckon I can handle this one."

Nore forced herself to swallow down the nauseous cocktail of guilt that rose in her throat when she closed the door of the Scissor Shack behind her. Monday's

hiccupping sniffles could still be heard through the glass. She felt bad for leaving her daughter with someone else for the night, but even worse was the joy that sprang up her calves like a weed, the relief of being free.

At home, she made herself enjoy the process of applying dark eyeshadow and mascara, of penciling her lips plum-purple. She had one of the new ballet-style miniskirts that were in all the women's magazines, and it felt good to slip into the sandals she couldn't wear at the salon. Nick wolf-whistled when she came out of the bathroom, and for the first time a while she felt a pleasurable blush stain her cheeks.

They met up with Nick's work buddies at a place near the UT Tyler campus, a smoky dancehall filled with longneck-sipping coeds in fringed skirts. Nick's work buddies—Angelo, Gerry, Travers, and Jack—couldn't keep their eyes off the girls, kept sidling up to them at the jukebox and offering to buy them fresh Miller Lights along with their George Strait and Garth Brooks. Every guy but Nick managed to get a two-step in with a girl on the dance floor. Nick sat at the bar with Nore, boot heels hooked behind the legs of his stool, rolling a sixer of Bud between his palms. His class ring clicking against the bottle.

Nore tipped the ashes of her cigarette into an empty tumbler. When they'd walked into the dancehall, Nore's heart had sunk; she'd ordered a whiskey, and put down roots into the nearest chair. She'd soured on country music years ago. She could not articulate to herself why, exactly, except that she hated how the songs always had a sad story to tell.

Life was hard enough as it is. Why would you listen to music that constantly reminded you of that fact?

Nick turned to her for the fourth time that night.

"Come out for just one, baby?"

"I told you. You want to dance so bad, you just go on and do it."

"You're my girl. I want you."

Nore shrugged and stubbed out her cigarette.

"Fine," she said at last.

As Nick led her onto the floor, she saw a group of college boys walk in by the bar. One of them was tall, broad, wearing an A&M shirt. He was too tall to be Dex, but she imagined for a second that it *was* Dex, seeing her here with this group of blue-stubbled workingmen thinking they could take a rich college girl home with them. The boys weren't much younger than Nick and his friends, but she could practically smell the Polo Green slapped on their freshly shaven necks, and beneath it an eager, confident odor—like newly mown hay in summer—of novelty, of excitement. The boys crowded around the bar to order drinks. Nore froze in her sandals halfway to the dance floor. Nick looked behind him to see why she'd stopped.

"Babe?"

"You know what, never mind," Nore called. She pulled out of Nick's grip and made for the bathroom. Out of the corner of her eye she saw his face harden, saw him turn and continue onto the dance floor anyway. When she came out, he was two-stepping

with a tall girl in tight jeans with bangs teased into a frothy blonde breaker over her forehead.

Nore went back to the bar and sat. The college boys clinked their bottles. Nore positioned herself in their line of sight, but their eyes, like the road crew's, were on those girls, their slim thighs curving out of their skirts like pairs of crescent moons. She saw the girl give Nick a kiss on the cheek. He grinned at the girl, then glanced over to the bar to where Nore sat. She expected to feel jealous, but the only emotion she experienced was a vague twinge of annoyance, as though Nick had merely inconvenienced her.

The air was blue with smoke and neon. Nick fought through a group of cowboy wannabes in black Stetsons and ribbon shirts to reach her.

"Hey, I'm sorry. I didn't know that would happen."

He rubbed the back of his neck and grimaced.

Nore lifted up one shoulder and dropped it.

"I don't care. You do what you want."

"You don't care?"

"No."

Nick's face arranged itself into an expression between anger and sadness.

"Let's just go then, if this doesn't mean anything to you."

"Nick, don't be like that."

"Like what?" He motioned to the bartender to close the tab. Then he stared at the receipt, opened his wallet, and frowned.

"Shit," he muttered. Even in the dimness, she could pick out the scarlet flush of his ears.

Gerry emerged from the forest of jostling elbows to order a whiskey and water, and saw Nick poised with the gaping wallet. He reached into his back pocket, retrieved his own wallet, and threw down a twenty.

"Got you covered, man," Gerry slurred. He wandered back toward the dance floor.

The ride back to the apartment was predictably silent. They had to pull over to let an ambulance pass. Nick remained parked on the shoulder long after the fractured red and blue lights had disappeared around the corner, staring ahead at some unspecified point on the heavily patched street.

"You don't love me," he said.

Nore pointed her face to the window. It was true; no matter how Nick tried to be a good boyfriend to her, a good father to Monday, no matter what he did it would never make her love him. She'd realized this, though in less certain terms, the day after Monday had been born. Gertie had come over to the hospital to hold her granddaughter. A nurse had come in and said that the baby's father, Nick was in the waiting area.

Nore's mother had put Monday into the rolling bassinet, crossed her arms, and said to the nurse, "You can tell that boy to scram. He isn't going to be any good here."

That night, Nick snuck back onto the maternity ward with flowers and a dollar store teddy bear. Nore had not found his determination as romantic as she expected she might have. She'd accepted the flowers and the bear, and watched Nick cradle Monday in

his arms with that a similar vague emotion, though not of annoyance—more like an obligatory tenderness, understanding but not *feeling* the warmth that the sight should bring. She later came to theorize that, alone in the middle of the night, in that hospital with its bile-yellow walls, Monday had soaked up every ounce of love she had to give.

Nore looked back to Nick. He sat with both hands gripping the wheel like a lifesaver.

"No," she said softly.

A muscle in his jaw tightened. He grasped the gear shift and jerked it into first. At the apartment, he grabbed a fistful of blankets and a pillow and made a nest on the couch. From the bedroom, Nore heard the roar of white noise from the television like a waterfall.

Nick dropped Nore off early at the Scissor Shack the next morning without a word, pulling away from the curb with a blast from the cut muffler. Nore set about her work for the day, rinsing Barbicide from her combs and scissors, checking the levels in the shampoo and conditioner bottles by the sink, folding towels and capes and stacking them in the cabinet.

The second person to arrive that morning was Jane Ingerson, the Scissor Shack's owner. Nore and the other beauticians rented their booth space from her, but Jane liked to maintain certain standards for the place, namely, the beauty parlor's appeal to the retiree set. She refused to change the twenty-year-old posters of beehive updos and feathered hair, inspected all the magazines they set out for their patrons and cut out any stories or pictures she found too racy.

Jane came in carrying a box of kolaches from the donut shop. She bid Nore a genteel good-morning and put the box in the staff room. Jane's little shows of generosity were all a ruse, Nore thought—just a way to placate the beauticians when she came after them about often they sanitized their brushes or said "yes ma'am" to their geriatric customers.

One of Nore's regulars came in, Mrs. Gibbs's standing eight-thirty appointment to have her perm reset. Nore avoided Jane Ingerson's beady-eyed gaze as she washed Mrs. Gibbs's hair and set it in rollers. Just as she led the old woman off to sit under the dryer, Sonia came in carrying Monday. Relief and anxiety prickled the back of Nore's neck.

Sonia caught sight of Jane Ingerson watching Nore from her perch by the manicure tables. Monday screamed at the sight of her mother and held out her hands. Nore took her daughter into her arms. Monday cinched her legs around Nore's hip so tight she thought her knees would leave bruises on her ribs.

"Thought she'd cry all night missing you," Sonia said, her tone light despite the clear weariness on her face.

"Thanks," Nore said, heart sinking. So much for asking Sonia to babysit again.

Like the last time Monday had stayed at work all day with Nore, her daughter was a ball of anxiety. When she wasn't clinging to her mother, she ran around the salon, nearly knocking the legs out from under Mrs. Gibbs. Midway through her appointment with Mrs. Duffy, the always elegantly-coiffed wife of an old boy Tyler banker, reached out a red-nailed claw and snatched Monday's wrist. She leaned in close to Monday with her face twisted into a severe disapproving mask.

"You need to behave, little girl," Mrs. Duffy said. "You're embarrassing your mama."

Monday gaped up at the old woman. Then she screwed up her face and bawled. She sat down right on the clipping-covered floor and fisted handfuls of hair.

"Really," Mrs. Duffy said. "What a spectacle."

In the vast mirror mounted over Nore's booth, she could see the reflections of the chairs in the waiting area, Jane Ingerson rising smoothly, almost smugly. Nore was the youngest of the beauticians who rented booths from her, and so had always been the first one Jane picked on.

Nore pocketed her scissors and bent to scoop Monday up from the floor. Her daughter pressed her wet face into Nore's neck. A chilly anger settled into Nore's limbs.

"You need to apologize," she said to Mrs. Duffy. "She's just a little girl. You scared her."

Mrs. Duffy's penciled eyebrows pushed up the skin of her forehead like a stack of old towels.

"*I* need to apologize?"

"Yes," Nore said. "You don't touch my daughter. You have a problem with her, you talk to me."

Nore could practically feel Jane Ingerson's breath on her neck.

"Is there a problem here, ladies?"

Mrs. Duffy trained her wounded blue eyes on Nore's boss.

"I have been a customer here for forty years," she sniffed. "I have *never* been treated this way."

Jane Ingerson nodded sympathetically. She turned to Nore.

"You should apologize to Mrs. Duffy. And you'll give her this haircut free of charge."

Nore clutched Monday to her breast. Over the tops of the women's heads, she saw Sonia shake hers from side to side, as if to say, *Keep cool, whatever you do*.

Nore took a step back from Jane Ingerson.

"You know what? I was just leaving anyway."

Nore walked home. It took her almost an hour. She carried her daughter through the white July heat. Close to their apartment complex, they passed along the fence and gate to the baseball field that the city had locked up after the stands collapsed. They walked by the marquee of the black Methodist Church that left its doors open on Sunday, the sound of all that singing, if she happened to be near enough to tear, always tugged at her heart with an old ache she tried to push away but never could. She put Monday to bed after a dinner of Kraft mac and cheese and canned green beans and lay awake listening to sirens scream by, expecting and dreading Nick to come home.

He finally came into the apartment around three a.m. Nore heard the hiss of the water hitting the wall of the shower and prayed it wouldn't wake Monday. She sat up in bed and waited for him to come into the room. One of the slats of the Venetian blinds was broken, and the streetlight outside pushed a yellow coin of light onto the carpet.

Nick came in and closed the door, a towel knotted around his waist.

"I'm sorry," he said, voice wooden. "You must have been worried."

Nick went on, "Angelo, he was digging at us, said he wanted to take us to this new place where they had these great dancers. I tried to back out but they were calling me names, you know how guys are." He chafed his brow. He spoke as though he were reading from a script.

"So we all went. They got one too many drinks in me. One of the girls there, a waitress, she kept talking sweet to me. I don't know what I was thinking."

"Stop," Nore said. "I don't want to know the rest."

"You're not angry?" he asked. Just like the night before.

"So you got with another girl," she said. She waited for the long-delayed anger to strike her, for her to do what she was supposed to and slap him. "What am I supposed to say?"

Nore *was* angry, she decided. But not at what he'd done. The fury scorching her insides came out of a realization that, no matter, what Nick did good or ill, she was stuck.

Nick suddenly turned and punched the wall. His fist made a crater in the sheetrock. Nore heard Monday stir in her crib in the other bedroom and whimper.

"You won't fight for us?" Nick hissed. "You're just dead inside? You don't care about me at all? What about Monday?"

"I don't see why that should matter to you," Nore spat, "since you're not her father."

Blood galloped through the chambers of her heart, pulsed at her wrist and temples. She hadn't known she was going to say it until she did. She registered Nick's face go slack, and then stiffen with a kind of hopeful cynicism.

"You *are* angry. You're just saying that to say that."

"No, I fucking mean it. I was with someone else before I got with you. She's not yours."

Nick scrubbed a hand across his stubbled cheeks.

"I'm her father. I got you out of that place."

The door creaked open. Monday poked her face into the room, and then slipped through the opening and toddled sleepily to Nore. Nick gave the pair of them a long look, grief and rage etched into the crevices of his face. Then he left the bedroom and slammed the door behind him.

Nore tried to make it on her own after she left Nick. She still did not have a car. She managed to scrape together enough savings to put a down payment on an efficiency apartment and started cutting and styling hair out of her kitchen.

One of the first things she did was cut Monday's hair.

She'd only meant to give her daughter a bob, something short enough to keep it out of her way, but once she got she scissors running through Monday's curls, she found herself cutting closer and closer to her scalp. Long ribbons of hair draped across the counter. When she was done, she ran her palm across the crown of Monday's head, felt

the texture of shorn hair like the bristles of an old toothbrush. Monday grinned and put her hands up on the glinting fuzz.

"All gone, Mama," she said.

Doing hair out of her kitchen was not enough. Nore contemplated applying for unemployment benefits, but even considering that put her in a depression so severe she knew she'd never be able to go through with it. The women at the maternity home had told her this was exactly what would happen if she kept her baby.

You'll be nothing. You'll be a lay about on Welfare. Your baby will be eating bread and water like a prisoner.

A month later, she called her mother to come get her.

Nore kept to herself the entire drive from Tyler to Fergus. Monday fell asleep in the backseat, and if Nore's mother noticed the shocking shortness of the little girl's hair, she had sufficient prudence not to say anything about it. After Nore had set up Monday's crib in the corner of her old bedroom and put her daughter to bed, she joined Gertie in the kitchen. She put her head down on the table. Her mother fixed her a stack of Bisquick pancakes. Though Nore was hungry, she couldn't eat.

"What are you going to do now, Nore?" Gertie said. The bird clock's tick sharpened the silence in the kitchen.

She stuck it out another six months. She worked at the Great Clips, then as a photographer's secretary, as a line cook at the Sonic, cleaned rich women's houses on the

east side of town. She was never fired or let go, but moved from job to job because inevitably she would see that mixture of pity and scorn creep into the faces of the people she worked for, and couldn't bear how recognizing it made her feel. Shame: she was learning to numb herself from it; guilt: that was a tired habit. But when dealing with her clients' and boss's judgment got to the point that seeing her daughter stirred an ember of resentment, when hearing her daughter's laugh made her feel sick and angry—then she knew it was time to find a new job.

Sometimes, Nore would pass by the football stadium and find her breath burning in her throat. It was fall again. The lights shone over the tops of the trees, and bats swooped after bugs in their glow. She did not always think of Dex, but when she saw the stadium, and the green-bedecked people walking into and out of it, she remembered him. He would be at college, now. The only images Nore had of college campuses (Lovell County Junior College didn't really count) came from movies she'd seen. She tried to imagine Dex climbing the steps of an ivy covered building, wearing one of those dopey sweaters tied around his shoulders, but she could not manage it. She only ever saw him in that camouflage jacket, athletics bag swung over his shoulder, dusty boots crunching gravel as he tugged the handle of that blue Jeep. Thinking of Dex filled her with a regret so unnamable, her inability to pin it down caused her further distress. She tried to remember him as little as possible.

In her mother's house, they put out traps when they found mouse pellets in the cabinets. Nore was always afraid Monday's fingers would find the trap instead of a mouse. She'd discovered that about motherhood, too—the constant, almost paralyzing

fear. She couldn't be there for her daughter like her daughter needed her to be. In October, Monday came down with a terrible fever and rash. Nore hadn't been sure if she should take her to the hospital or not until her daughter started seizing, her eyes rolled back in her head. While Nore panicked, Gertie had the wherewithal to put her fingers in Monday's mouth and dial the ambulance with the other hand.

After a long night in the ER, the doctor informed Nore that it was a bad case of Roseola, but that Monday would be fine. The seizure had been fever-induced and shouldn't happen again. Nore quit her job of waiting tables to stay at home, giving Monday hourly alcohol rub-downs to keep her cool. But even after Monday got well, tending to her daughter's needs, even minor ones, made Nore's limbs and breath freeze up, a panicked weight press against her lungs.

Gertie pulled back her hours at the plant while Nore cobbled together an income from her various part-time jobs. Often she'd come home, dead on her feet, to find her mother propped up on pillows next to Monday's crib, reading to her. Gertie had rarely done that for Nore. She'd always been so busy trying to please Nore's father. It was as though, given a second chance, she was delighted to get everything right with Monday that she hadn't with her own daughter. She knew when to ignore Monday's tantrums and when to humor them. She knew how to negotiate Monday's demands for candy or too much television without simply caving against them, like Nore had. Gertie started talking about setting up a college fund for Monday. That thought hadn't even seemed to enter her head when it came to Nore. She often found herself thinking troubling thoughts: *Monday*

would be better off without me. I can't be the mother she needs me to be. And even worse, leaving thoughts: *I can start over*.

Near that Christmas of 1985, Nore took the DeVille out to the mall in Tyler to buy a book Monday wanted. Gertie had taken Monday to the library a few months ago, and Monday became so attached to the library's copy of *Goodnight, Moon* that she'd wept bitterly when they had to take it back. As early as six months old, Monday had had a tendency to get too attached to things, throwing tantrums when something she loved was taken away or denied her, but this growing fondness for books—maybe it was another sign that she'd inherited her father's smarts. Or maybe it was something her grandmother was able to inspire, that Nore could not. She felt like a fraud when she placed the book in front of the cashier, as though the acne-scarred kid running the register might snatch the book up and demand that she pick out a different gift.

Nore had the book wrapped up on the passenger seat when she passed the old honky-tonk on I-20. She recalled seeing it before the crash, when all the beer signs were lit up bright as billboards, the parking lot crammed with brand-new Dodge Rams and F-250s with chrome hubcaps. Now, it was all battered Chevy Citations, a station wagon, paste-colored Dodge Omnis. But parked at the far edge of the lot: a gleaming black semi-truck, twin exhaust pipes thrust up like a bull's horns. She wanted to pull over and take a closer look. The shopping bag slid in the front seat. She gripped the Cadillac's wheel, forced herself to turn off the highway.

Christmas lights draped Fergus in a twinkling spider web. Instead of making the place cheerier, like it used to, the holiday splendor seemed only to highlight how the town had come down in the last few years, after all the drilling outfits and roughnecks had pulled out to seek greener pastures, as the saying went. The colored bulbs strung along the eaves of the buildings on Main were doubled in the darkened windows. The sign for Moyer's Pharmacy had burned out, hadn't been replaced. Camille's still pulled in some business, but the tinsel strung between the horns of the fiberglass dairy cow that adorned the diner's roof had a limp, tired quality. By the time Nore arrived home, she felt heavy. In contrast, the bag with Monday's Christmas presents was so light she didn't want to bring it inside, afraid the wind might snatch it away.

Agnes Fletcher and her mother were in the kitchen with Monday. Nore could hear their voices as she tucked the shopping bag behind the spindly Christmas tree. Her daughter's giggle blared through the cracked door. Nore entered the kitchen and saw her daughter up to her elbows in sugar, frosting, and the collapsed rectangles of a gingerbread house.

"Agnes brought over a kit, hon," Gertie said.

Nore watched the two older women and her daughter try to reconstruct the house. Monday kept popping the gum drops and marshmallows into her mouth. Nore watched, feeling as though the scene were happening inside a snow globe, the glass so thick and curved that any attempt to crack it would bounce off uselessly. Nore turned and went back into the living room, switched on the television. Her body sunk into the couch. Her back was stiff, her feet swollen. She'd been bent over toilets and marble floors all day,

the scent of lemon polish and bleach burning away her nose's capability to smell anything else.

Agnes eventually left, and Gertie bathed Monday and put her to bed after reading her *Eloise at Christmastime*. Gertie popped her head into the living room to tell Nore she was heading off to sleep as well. Nore shrugged and continued to stare at the television. When the broadcast ended, she got up and went to her bedroom door. She placed her hand on the knob, but could not turn it. She put her ear to the wood and listened to Monday breathe. Her daughter's light snores like the purr of a toy train's motor.

Nore backed away from the door. She pulled on her coat and shoes and slipped out of the house beneath the carport. She did not get into the car. Instead, she walked. She walked to the end of Sycamore. She touched the latch to the gate of the cemetery but did not go in. The sky was overcast and the streetlights' reach was not enough to light the bench beneath the tree. Nore kept walking. She turned north. She did not realize she was making for the honky-tonk until a lone beer sign glimmered over the top of the overpass like a star.

She knew what would happen next. She could feel it in her bones, in the hollow space next to her heart where she used to think her soul lived. When she'd given birth to Monday, she thought she felt something else detach, a lightness, as though both her soul and her daughter's had slithered out of her. She saw herself going up to the bar, ordering a whiskey and ginger ale. She saw herself searching for the owner of that black truck, the one with the gleaming aluminum sleeper. He would buy her a drink, and she'd let him tell her all about that truck, and when he offered to show her the inside of the sleeper, she'd

go with him. She saw her daughter climbing up those ivied college steps, the same ones from her vision of Dex. In this imagining, Monday was grown, her face pinched with that beautiful, curious intelligence, that expression that made Nore ache inside because she knew it could not have come from her—how could it?

The wind tumbled out of the trees. It tousled her ponytail, and a few strands of pine duff scraped across the sidewalk. She pushed forward into that wind, moving beneath the overpass. She saw herself as though looking down from the bridge, her small shape walking out of one life, and into another.